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Performing fandom, performing community : a case study of The Sopranos and its online fandom

Performing Fandom, Performing Community:
A case study of *The Sopranos* and its online fandom

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the terms fandom, community, and 'quality' are negotiated within the online social networks that are devoted to the US HBO series *The Sopranos*. By extending perspectives that challenge theoretical models of audience resistance, much of the analysis considers fan discussion forum activity as a playful, performative strategy which enables fans reflexively to assert their individual or group identity. Fan performances often reflect a desire to strive for utopian versions of community while also making subcultural assertions of difference and distinction within *Sopranos*-related groups. I argue that the performance of distinction and the reproduction of taste hierarchies within groups interacts with *The Sopranos'* own cultural performance as 'quality' TV. As such, the analysis focuses on how fan activity is implicated with, rather than resisting, economic, industrial capitalist interests. In considering claims that the Internet has mainstreamed fandom, I suggest that the cultural work that *The Sopranos'* fans perform, indicates a complex practice which challenges the separation of the terms 'mainstream' and 'subcultural'.

The research utilises a range of virtual ethnographic and qualitative research strategies. The project locates fan-audiences and their constructed secondary texts throughout multiple *Sopranos*-related fan discussion forums. Modes of practice such as participant-observation, e-mail correspondence, real-time chats and reflexivity are employed in order to shape the final gathering and textual analysis of empirical data. I argue that the deployment of an autoethnographic narrative accounts for the ways in which the scholar-fan's discursive locations inform subsequent analysis. I assert that this critical approach complicates assumptions about the researcher's rational, detached subjectivity, thus challenging ethnographic authority and textual transparency.

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My first expression of academic appreciation goes to my supervisor Janet Thumim who offered her valuable time and advice during the early planning stages before I formally applied for PhD research. Her consistent high intellectual standards and emotional support bestowed me with the encouragement and confidence I needed to ensure I would complete this thesis. I am also indebted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council whose funding for the thesis provided recognition that this project was worth pursuing. During the second year of study I also became seriously ill. I would like to thank the AHRC and the University of Bristol for agreeing to suspend my studies for the lengthy period of time needed for my recovery.

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I am grateful to the individuals I encountered throughout many *Sopranos*-related World Wide Web spaces for making my personal and scholarly experience of TV fandom an enriching, thought provoking, and endlessly challenging one. Their passion for *The Sopranos*, enthusiasm for fandom, and the readiness of some respondents to assist in this research has been a great source of inspiration and validation for this work.

Outside of the academic sphere and boundaries of the fan community, I am indebted to my husband, Yoav Ben-Shlomo, for the ongoing intellectual, emotional, and practical support he has given me. For the many times he has taken over domestic and childcare responsibilities, for the many hours spent helping with Figures and Tables, Atlas.ti and Reference Manager technical support, as well as collections and deliveries to the library, I am forever grateful. Finally I thank my son and daughter, Elie and Eva, who were far too young when I started this research, and who have exhibited an admirable amount of maturity when accepting that their mother could not always devote her attention to them. I am also grateful to them for reminding me that there is a world outside of academic interests, for those days when I was forced to separate myself from the thesis and enjoy the everyday pleasures of life and children's play. I dedicate this thesis to them.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original, except where indicated by special reference in the text, and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other academic degree. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed..... Jeannette Monaco ..... Date ..... Sept. 5, 2007 .....

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Introduction

> It has become impossible to discuss popular consumption without reference to fandom and fan theory, just as it has become next to impossible to find realms of public life which are unaffected by fandom – from the intermingling of show business, sports and politics to the everyday life talk about one's favourite music, television show or film. (Sandvoss 2005: 3)

As scholarship in the area of media fandom has tended to shift its attention from more traditional fan activities, such as club meetings, conventions, or the print publications of fanzines, to forms of fan activity taking place on the World Wide Web, questions relating to the re-conceptualisation of 'media fandom' are continuing to preoccupy research. If it has become impossible to refer to the consumption of popular media forms without referring to 'fandom or fan theory', as Cornel Sandvoss (*ibid.*) asserts, it would appear equally difficult to discuss fandom or fan theory without addressing how the Internet has impacted upon the formation of television audience communities. From the TV industry's official websites which collaborate with fans and invite viewers to participate in the creation of new shows long before they are even aired,[1] to the high quality fan sites and blogs which command the attention of producers by hosting fan debates, fan art/fiction, or video production, the World Wide Web has blurred the boundaries between production and consumption and opened up fandom's possibilities to a wider range of global participants. This thesis aims to explore the industrial, economic, technological and symbolic conditions that inform fandom's 'new' possibilities by offering a case study ethnographic analysis of sections of one online television fan community.

Increasing attention to the implications of media convergence in relation to notions of the 'active audience' have provoked a lengthy series of current debates which recognise the limitations of earlier theoretical models that underpinned conceptualisations of fandom as a subversive evasion of dominant power regimes. As many have now acknowledged, including Henry Jenkins (Hills & Jenkins 2001; Jenkins 2006a; 2007), the tendency to romanticise fans as heroic, tactical, 'rogue readers' (Jenkins 2006a: 1), also reflected the specific political and historical moment of the cultural studies' tradition at a time when fans were constructed in scholarly accounts as deviant 'others' (cf. Jenson 1992), or were perceived in the public sphere as inadequate social misfits who need to 'Get a Life'. William Shatner's derogatory dismissal of 'Trekkies' on *Saturday Night Live*[2] (see Jenkins 1992: Chapter 1), which was also recognised in interviews with the actor (*ibid.*: 11), emphasised the television industry's tendency to treat fans

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[1] Consider, for example, UK Channel 4's online appeal to potential audiences for the recent teen series *Skins*. As *The Observer* journalist James Robinson (2007: 13) observes, Channel 4 used the Internet to preview clips and invited viewers 'to develop new characters, some of which were incorporated into the series'. Philip O'Ferrall, vice president of digital media at MTV Networks, was quoted as stating; 'As programme-makers we want ideas that can evolve from being online to being on TV, which can engage the audience on every platform. It's about giving power back to the consumer and allowing them to be part of a show when it suits them.'

[2] See the Television and Film Index for broadcast and release dates of the TV shows and films referenced throughout the thesis.

with contempt . As cultural studies no longer finds itself in a position where it has to defend fans whose relationship to the media industry is now thriving, the boundaries which have defined the area of fan studies have broadened significantly. Yet, while it may be the case that many niche, fan-audiences have become more respectable and indeed sought out by the media and culture industries, the continuing negative associations with certain types of fandoms have left a powerful cultural residue, one which has implications for the ways in which individuals identify or perform their affective relationships to certain media texts.

It may, therefore, be unproblematic, thanks to the efforts of Henry Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, and Constance Penley, for current 'scholar-fans' (Hills 2002) openly to celebrate their participation in the realms of popular culture and acknowledge in their writing, their subjective proximities to the subcultural fan communities they study (see Hills & Jenkins 2001). However, I have been frequently reminded of the fact that other academic faculties outside of the cultural studies discipline, and indeed areas of wider public life, seem to have little patience for discussions about the value of research on television fandom, let alone fandom's move into cyberspace. The following examples are useful anecdotes which might help illustrate the point. Just before the start of this research my husband and I had lunch with one of his medical profession colleagues and his lawyer wife. My excited proclamation that I was a fan of *The Sopranos* and would spend the next four years studying the cultural appeal of the US 'quality' television drama series and its Internet fandom was met with blank expression, polite silence, and then restrained laughs. The knowledge that the AHRC agreed to fund the project seemed to encourage the onslaught of light-hearted jokes that followed. With the NHS in such a mess, why was tax payers' money being thrown away to support such nonsense, or words to that effect. Another encounter with an independent girls' school headmistress about the details of this research prompted her to launch into her worries about young people watching too much television (*Big Brother* and *EastEnders* came up as examples) and spending too much time on the Internet where they are vulnerable to the prey of strangers, i.e., potential paedophiles. By implication, television watching and social networking in online contexts, then, was equated with an uncontrollable, juvenile practice that should be monitored. The suggestion that perverse predators were also invading online spaces suggested that if fans were not naive, duped innocents, then they were immature, psychologically damaged individuals. These elitist reactions seemed unsurprising and typical, as Bourdieu's (1994 [1979]) study *Distinction* has suggested, coming from middle-aged, middle-class individuals who enjoyed positioning themselves with great distance from vulgar, lower cultural forms. A visit a couple of years later to a local *Odd Bins* for a bottle of wine indicated the compelling influence of this discourse on younger folk, when a young, twenty-something, trendy looking, friendly male attendant, who happened to mention he was a PhD student at the University of Bristol in the Physics Department, prompted me to disclose my own PhD status at the University. Again, my brief mention of the project sent him into slight hysterics, with me trying to justify the worth of such

research that emerged out of a discipline that fought hard, in the face of similar forms of derision, to give voice to 'ordinary culture' (Williams 1997 [1958]) and marginalised communities. In spite of my efforts, his final comment made me seriously question whether the cultural studies fight had actually been won: 'We'll see who has the last laugh when you can't find a job at the end of it. Come back here then and I'll see what I can find for you.'

While the cultural status of the fan may appear to be changing to some degree, as Gray *et al.* (2007: 4) have suggested, the stereotypes that are still perpetuated in recent representations of fandom in the media no doubt play an important part in fuelling such strong opinions. The case of the recent reporting of Harry Potter fans or 'Potterheads' as 'infinitely geeky' and 'quintessential losers' (*ibid.*: 4, citing *The New York Post*) against, by implication, the more acceptable image of 'the New York Yankees fans' who constitute the *New York Post*'s 'pinstripe readership' (*ibid*), illustrates how the wider acceptability of some forms of fandom is often determined by the 'social image' (Ang 1985, cited in Brower 1992: 163), or the position of the cultural form within the social hierarchy. Baseball or football fandom has therefore acquired a more acceptable status than the fandom connected to fictional *Harry Potter* books and films aimed at young audiences, and may even be seen as desirable when these interests are supported by the likes of prominent celebrities or politicians (see Gray *et al.* 2007: 5). In terms of what is considered fashionable, it is therefore, 'the choice of the object of fandom that matters most' (*ibid.*). Imagine what the reaction to my research would have been if the focus was on soap opera fans? As Gray *et al.* (*ibid.*) argue, there are certainly far more serious social consequences involved if a major political male figure came out publicly as a fan of soap operas than if he confessed his fandom to football, baseball, or, I would add, *The Sopranos*.

The role that *The Sopranos* has played in fostering HBO's branded image as 'not TV', has also meant that fan cultures associated with HBO shows, such as *Sex and The City*, or other 'quality' series, may be, unsurprisingly, now perceived as 'high-profile' (*ibid.*) ones in comparison to those connected with *Star Trek*. The ultimate reinforcement of *The Sopranos'* high cultural status has been most recently expressed not only through US press hype and broadcast news building up to the show's finale, but in the current US democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton's, *Sopranos* 'spoof', in which she and Bill perform a parody of the finale's last scene while revealing the winning public voted campaign theme song. [3] The fact that Clinton also managed to persuade a key actor from the show, Vince Curatola, who played John Sacramoni, to participate in a cameo role, only added more street credibility to the politician who has now proven to her public that she too can be media savvy, play the games of popular culture, and participate in postmodernism's ironic sensibilities. Similarly, Bill Clinton's previous democratic Vice President, Al Gore's, timely performance, according to one reporter, as 'a die-hard fan' (Waxman 2007) of *The Sopranos* would seem to support Hillary Clinton's suggestion that the

[3] See www.hillaryclinton.com/. Accessed on July 16, 2007.

democratic party shares the same everyday language and common ground with the US public. So committed was Gore to viewing the series' final episode when he knew he would not be able to see it during its usual Sunday night broadcast time as he was scheduled for a trip to Istanbul, that he approached the series' executive producer Brad Grey and requested a special advanced copy.[4] According to *The New York Times* reporter, after some hesitation, Grey agreed to deliver the episode in a secure steel bound case which Gore could only access during his flight, to coincide with the time of the show's broadcast, when he would be given the secret code by Grey. Gore's apparent, impatient fannish desires to access the goods before hand, however, were performed for the camera, and for Grey who displays the photo on his desk, which captures Gore 'trying to pry open the case' (*ibid.*). One can only imagine the eager Clintons and Gores gathering together with great anticipation on Sunday evenings with lasagna made from a Carmela Soprano recipe with all political talk coming to an abrupt halt when the show's opening credits appear. Whether or not they would find it tempting to log onto a fan site and read about fans' responses to the series' approach to the subject of terrorism or read the latest spoilers, is perhaps, a personal detail they may not want to reveal. Admitting you love the show is one thing, many might argue, but confessing that you take your fan enthusiasm to the next level is another. If 'sneaking a peak' (Jenkins 2007: 361) at what others are saying about your favourite show is just the beginning of 'a slippery slope' (*ibid*) into online fandom, as Jenkins asserts, it is an activity of which many may still be wary.

The concerns of this thesis reflect my curiosity about examining the significance of certain television consumption choices and related social activities such as those taking place in communication networks on the Internet, which become meaningful processes through which individuals symbolically construct their sense of self. The degree of commitment that is evident across the plethora of TV fan hosted webpages and discussion forums, provides evidence, as Robin Nelson (1997: 3) asserted ten years ago, 'that many people pay particular attention to specific programmes', in spite of the technological transformations taking place in the current age of media convergence which may contribute to less attentive TV viewing.[5] As individuals move online into interactive spaces which focus on shared pleasures in television viewing, their identity construction increasingly involves the negotiation and management of a fan identity (cf. Harrington & Bielby 1995). The theoretical frameworks I have drawn upon and the paths I have taken in this research hence indicate a desire to explore the implications of what it means to enter into the 'slippery slope' of a collective, organised online fandom which is committed to a 'quality' television series that has, in the course of its long six season life, as it has evolved into a public media event, attracted the attention of media studies scholars, the US nation, and some of the international 'community'. The cultural value of the series alone, however, does not

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[4] The report noted that Brad Grey is also Chairman of Paramount 'whose studio distributed his documentary [*An Inconvenient Truth*]' (Waxman 2007).

[5] Consider, for example, Robinson's (2007: 10), observation of Google's claim that 'the average Briton spent 164 minutes a day using the internet and just 148 minutes watching TV'.

necessarily justify placing it under academic scrutiny. I am mainly concerned with investigating the ways in which fans' emotional investments with the values and stories the series articulates, interact with the fan practices that create the norms, values, and moral codes which contribute to the symbolic construction of community (Cohen 1985).

I am aware of Jenkins's (1992: 40) assertion that although some media fans claim exclusive commitment to single shows, stars or celebrities, 'others use individual series as points of entry into a broader fan community, linking to an intertextual network composed of many programs, films, books, comics, and other popular materials'. Media fans' relationships to their fan objects, according to Jenkins (Hills & Jenkins 2001), are therefore not 'exclusive', 'Insofar as fans are nomadic and can share multiple texts as deeply meaningful to them'. In considering accusations that earlier fan studies overemphasis on fans of the science fiction genre limited the analytical scope from which to theorise media fandom, my account of fans devoted to one television text will therefore be subject to some criticism as it may 'tend[s] to suggest an overly bounded fan 'group' ' (Hills 2002: 42). While this research is committed to avoiding the problematic conceptual and methodological frameworks which determined earlier fan ethnographies, I have not, however, set out to propose a new theory of fandom. My aim from the start of this project has been, rather, to respond, through detailed micro-level ethnographic empirical investigation, to theoretical proposals that have emerged from the newer generation of fan scholarship which has stressed the importance of examining the emotional and performative dimensions of fandom. Matt Hills's (2002) important and comprehensive account of fans and fandom provokes scholars to consider how 'terms such as 'fan' and 'cult'', rather than simply circulating as 'labels' 'may instead form part of a cultural struggle over meaning and affect' (*ibid*: xi). Fandom is thus performative as it involves cultural work through the claiming or disclaiming of fan identity. Although, unlike Grossberg, (1992: 56) Hills introduces emotions into his definition of affect and develops this in his consideration of affective fan play, his reference recalls Grossberg's assertion that 'Within an affective sensibility, texts serve as 'billboards' of an investment' (Grossberg 1992: 57). Affect 'produces maps which direct our investments in and into the world; these maps tell us where and how we become absorbed – not into the self but into the world – as potential locations for our self-identifications, and with what intensities' (*ibid.*). As Hills asserts in his interview with Jenkins,

> What's so important to fans...is that these values are found in a very specific set of texts, which implies in a sense that these texts are elevated, that they are numinous. These texts hold the fans' attention in a certain way; they compel fan attention, and therefore the faith that the fan would feel in a certain narrative universe is very much fixed on that universe. (Hills & Jenkins 2001).

Fans thus choose certain texts, invest 'more in some than in others' (Grossberg 1992: 58) because they 'matter' to them and 'come to constitute a dominant part of the fan's identity'

(*ibid.*) in very specific ways at different points in their life history. Harrington and Bielby (1995: 6) have also argued,

> it matters that *Star Trek* fans choose that particular programme to be a fan of, or that soap fans choose to be fans of soaps and not, say, of *Jeopardy*. Fan behaviour is not haphazard, accidental, or spontaneous. It reflects the cultural object or text it addresses.

It matters then, that *The Sopranos* may be more significant to some individuals' fan identities (Hills, in Hills & Jenkins 2001) or 'compel fan attention' more strongly for some than *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The West Wing*, *The L Word*, *Days of Our Lives*, *Big Brother*, *The Apprentice,* or *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, even if these programmes still offer other degrees of pleasure. It matters that some fans will engage in and create profound meaning from certain subcultural rituals such as setting out on a media fan pilgrimage to *The Sopranos'* locations, while others may choose to visit Granada Studios where *Coronation Street* is filmed (see Couldry 2000; 2007).

This study, therefore, is interested in attempting to trace the motivations that lead some fans, and I include myself in this description, of this particular text to engage in an intense performative dialogue with the series and with other fans at this particular historical moment. This fan object may therefore matter more intensely to some members of *The Sopranos'* online community and thus form the basis for a long lasting 'enduring fandom' (Kuhn 2002). It may also be the case that the series fits into other 'cult fan' members' existing definition of a cult text, thereby becoming an important part of their intertextual network, as observed by Jenkins (1992), yet it may not be central to their fan identity. It might also be the case, that other members do not prioritise the series in terms of their identity projects yet find pleasure in casual fan participation. I would argue that only by remaining true to the detail of what Geertz has described as 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1993: 6-7), can scholars begin to consider the implications of the interactions between these diverse levels of fan commitment and make useful comparisons and connections with fan cultures in other areas. Similarities and differences between *The Sopranos'* fan practices and other fan groups can therefore be considered next to a range of empirical fan-audience research that has emerged since the commencement of this project. Lyn Thomas's (2002) work *Fans, Feminisms, and 'Quality' Media*, Will Brooker's article (2005) ' "It is Love": The Lewis Carroll Society as a Fan Community', and, with reference to online fandom, Jonathan Gray's (2005) article, 'Anti-fandom and the Moral Text', and Derek Johnson's (2007) chapter, 'Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom', all offer important accounts of particular types of media fan cultures. In addition, recent work such as Steve Bailey's (2005) *Media Audiences and Identity*, and Rebecca Williams's PhD research in progress, 'Pleasure and Power: Television Genre, Value

and Fan Practice in On-line Communities', [6] offer alternative, insightful approaches which emphasise breadth of analysis in their observations of fandoms across various cultural fields.

The position of the researcher in relation to the researched has generated much critical enquiry into questions relating to ethnographic authority. As I suggested above, the newer generation of scholar-fans now regularly foreground their proximities to the communities they study and my similar disclosure in this thesis is no exception. Chapter 4 provides the focus for a review of a range of relevant literature and debates that have emerged out of 'crisis scholarship'. This investigation forms the basis for my extended interrogation of the epistemological implications of 'scholar-fan' declaration in relation to how my own fan investments with the series informed the processes which contributed to the construction of this research account. I will therefore not rehearse my emphasis on the importance of the construction of the autoethnographic narrative at this point. However, it is necessary to direct the reader, at least in brief summary before I provide an overview of the structure of the thesis, to the virtual ethnographic approach I have taken.

My early encounters with *The Sopranos'* online fandom began soon after I developed a fan interest in the series when the show was first broadcast in the UK in 1999, and well before I officially registered for PhD study. By the time I had decided to formulate a proposal for PhD research, I began to see the benefits of moving away from a bounded, single site ethnography, as adopted by Nancy Baym (2000), and became interested in broadly adopting Christine Hine's (2000) principles for 'virtual ethnography' as a means of exploring how individuals' chosen interactive online spaces become meaningful to them as they negotiate the paths through which they construct and perform their fan identities. My own experience of participation as a 'newbie'[7] and later as a more confident online *Sopranos* fan, involved various Google searches for information related to the show, searches for fansites and discussion forums which were often listed through Web Rings, or links in fansites. In many cases I lurked[8], or dipped in and out of newsgroups and message boards, until I felt comfortable that I could participate in the groups' activities and conform to their unique styles of communication and norms of behaviour, which were variable across fan sites. Sometimes I would encounter various fans who also moved across sites, performing their prominent statuses in one space, yet hardly exhibiting a visible social presence in another. These experiences are indeed common and emphasise the mobile and interlinked nature of the Internet. Hine (2000: 61) argues that a multi-sited,

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[6] See www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/research/154/87.html?staff_id=89&n=Rebecca+Williams. Accessed on July 7, 2007.

[7] This term is commonly used in newsgroups and message boards to signify newcomers to the group who are learning the norms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) or the expectations of behaviour required from the group. When newcomers arrive to groups, they often introduce themselves as 'newbies'.

[8] 'Lurker' refers to someone who reads forum postings but does not post messages themselves. Forums are well aware of the presence of lurkers and often welcome their readership or invite them to engage in active posting participation.

connective ethnography can hence be 'conceived as an experiential, interactive and engaged exploration of connectivity'. A connective approach to studying social activity on the Internet is therefore sensitive to exploring the 'mixture of varying interlinked cultural sites and cultural connections' (*ibid.*: 62) which form the World Wide Web. Hine's approach places an emphasis on Castells's (1996) idea that social relations are increasingly informed by a new 'space of flows'. Unlike spaces of 'place' or location, the space of flows 'is organized around connection' (Hine 2000: 61, citing Castells [1996]).[9] It is this emphasis on the mobile aspect of Internet based computer-mediated communication (CMC) that facilitated my early investigation and experimental participant-observation throughout a range of *Sopranos*-related spaces, leading to my later fieldwork focus on two *Sopranos* fan created discussion forums, Sopranoland Forum and the Yahoo! SopranosForum newsgroup, which form the basis for the analyses in Chapters 6 and 7.[10] Chapter 5 provides a further discussion about these two sites while addressing some of the practical challenges I encountered when negotiating my scholar-fan identity which informed my data collection and sampling choices.

These research choices, discussed in Chapter 5, reflect the nature of the questions I formulated at the end of the first year of the study. In the most general sense, these questions reflect a cultural studies emphasis on exploring audience-text relations with a focus on fan communities, yet the study extends this approach by questioning how the new communication technology of the Internet has informed and shaped this phenomenon. In attempting to remain open to the surprises that ethnographic and qualitative research can introduce, in the way that a 'Grounded Theory' approach encourages, the questions are broadly constructed and are broken down into the three following areas:

- What impact do intratextual and extratextual constraints have in the creation of *The Sopranos'* online fan community? These 'constraints' are broken down into three categories: Systems of production: the role of commercial producer, director, creator; Textual dimensions of the series (generic hybridity); Supporting texts (ancillary products, marketing, publicity, journalistic discourse).

- How do computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the temporal and spatial orderings of the Internet affect *The Sopranos*' fans' performance of audiencehood (Nightingale 1996)?

- How are the social and affective dimensions of fandom experienced across the diverse World Wide Web? What types of unique *Sopranos* micro-community practices emerge

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[9] See Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell; Castells, M. (1996) 'The net and the self: working notes for a critical theory of the information society'. *Critique of Anthropology* 16(1): 9-38.; and Castells, M. (1997) *The Power of Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
[10] Pullen's (2000) useful overview of *Xena: Warrior Princess* related websites reflects a similar approach to the study of Internet fandom.

within these various performative spaces? What implications does the organisation of these spaces have for individual fan identities and subjectivities?

The chapter overview below provides a map of the theoretical and methodological territory I explored in order to investigate these questions.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The thesis is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 1 presents an in-depth examination of relevant literature which provides much of the theoretical groundwork necessary to contextualise theories of cultural performance and identity performance in relation to the study of audience communities. I move from considering earlier theorists such as Victor Turner (1969; 1982) and his work on 'social dramas' and liminality, to an investigation of Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) emphasis on the diffused audience and the processes of spectacle and performance. Fan performance is thus interrogated as a self-reflexive act which is intrinsically related to contemporary economic and industrial imperatives, and which depends on the presence of an audience, real or imagined. A detailed theoretical exploration of Judith Butler's work and relevant debates pertaining to the 'performative' accompanies this material in the latter part of the chapter and provides the basis from which to consider the complexities of fan discourse.

Chapter 2 extends Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) emphasis on cultural performance by considering how *The Sopranos* performs itself as an authentic, 'quality' television commodity. This chapter focuses on the series' historical position within the US 'quality' TV tradition and examines how marketing strategies and the journalistic circulation of quality discourses, such as those that elevate the TV auteur, shape meaning making processes. The chapter also considers how the series' 'operational aesthetic' (Mittell 2006, citing Harris 1981) and narrative strategies function to signal quality.

Chapter 3 returns to the subject of cultural studies' search for audience activity and desire to locate audience agency through narratives of resistance. This chapter considers the limitations of Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model with respect to this study, while examining earlier audience studies that inspired John Fiske's (1989; 1992a; 1992b) theoretical approach to fandom, which became an important reference point for fan studies scholarship that followed. The problems related to Fiske's use of Pierre Bourdieu's (1994 [1979])[11] work *Distinction* are considered at length. Drawing on Hills's (2002) critique of cultural studies' over-reliance on Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital', a case is made for more focused attention to 'social capital'.

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[11] Fiske (1992b) and Hills (2002) refer to the 1984, first Great Britain publication of *Distinction*.

As suggested above, Chapter 4 extends Chapter 3's critique of earlier media audience studies and fan scholarship, by providing a discussion of the implications of cultural studies' appropriation of the ethnographic tradition. The main focus of this chapter is to prioritise a highly self-critical reflexive approach to the subject of the researcher's multiple subjectivities in relation to the creation of a fan ethnography. Drawing on work such as Valerie Walkerdine's (1990; see also Walkerdine *et al.* 2002) and Hollway and Jefferson's (2000), I explore how my own research fantasies intruded upon the study, thus emphasising that research accounts are constructed rather than transparent truths. The latter part of the chapter hence makes concrete connections between the autoethnographic narrative and the narratives of other fans.

Chapter 5 marks a shift in focus from narratives of the personal to practical matters of research choices, including locating fieldwork sites, ethical considerations, collecting multiple forms of data, and narrowing down the material to a manageable sample which inevitably involves selection, fragmentation and generalisation. This chapter begins by foregrounding the usefulness of adopting a Grounded Theory approach as a flexible research strategy which emphasises developing analytical categories from observed phenomena rather than relying on *a priori* research protocols. I move on to consider the importance of attending to data with an emphasis on discourse analysis. What follows is a description of my collection methods and how I managed the data during the set time of virtual fieldwork. After presenting an overview of the quantitative findings and the themes that emerged, I discuss how I proceeded to code the material for meaningful qualitative analysis. Norman Fairclough's (1992; 1995) critical approach to discourse analysis (CDA), and his focus on 'interactional control features' provides a useful model from which to explore how the two groups under study negotiate their interpretative work.

Chapters 6 and 7 therefore consider, through closer qualitative analysis, the themes that arose throughout the research process and the sampled fieldwork data collection. In extending my emphasis on the importance of self-reflexivity, these chapters incorporate reflections about my own role as a participant scholar-fan within the groups.

Chapter 8, the concluding chapter, brings together the key theoretical issues considered earlier in the thesis through reflections upon the empirical findings, while introducing further questions. The latter part of the chapter explores more closely the issue of fan pleasure and play by drawing on the psychoanalytical model offered by D.W. Winnicott (1971) whose work has been the focus of much recent fan studies.

Chapter 1: Contextualising performance in audience research

1.0 INTRODUCTION

My investigation in this chapter constitutes a direct response to recent challenges in media studies that have called for an analytical approach to media consumption which accounts for the increasing complexity of the audience's relationship with interactive forms of popular entertainment genres.[12] Previous cultural studies accounts of audience activity have tended to privilege the text-reader methodological framework, which centred on questions of hegemonic power and active audience resistance or passive acquiescence to popular texts. As Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) have asserted, this conceptualising of the audience through 'active' and 'passive' binary oppositions seems inadequate for dealing with the dynamics that have created the contemporary 'diffused audience', an experience the authors write is better understood through the 'Spectacle/Performance Paradigm'. The following discussion will explore some of the key concerns which have shaped the paradigm's focus on 'identity formation and reformation in everyday life' (*ibid.*: 37) and consider its relevance for an analysis of online fan communities. I want to open this discussion with a reference to some earlier work that has influenced the theoretical direction of performance studies[13] and which has subsequently informed media studies scholarship.

1.1 PERFORMANCE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

While the term performance has often reflected the traditions of the theatre where actors stage a performance of an authorised or scripted dramatic text[14], performance also encompasses a range of cultural practices

> from the ritualization of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude. (Schechner 2003: xvii)

Performances have been generally understood as wilful social actions that take place in fixed, clocked time. Chaney (1998:17) contends that the dramaturgical metaphors of 'role, script, audience, stage, etc.' allow us to articulate the 'ways in which social action becomes possible'.

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[12] See Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998; Silverstone 1999b; Hills 2001 and 2002; Jenkins 2001; Lancaster 2001; and Sandvoss 2005.

[13] For a useful introduction to the historical developments of performance studies at New York University's Tisch School of The Arts, see Schechner 2002.

[14] My reference to theatrical performance here is perhaps overly generalised. Worthen (1998) provides a useful critique of the problem surrounding the understanding that stage performance is merely an 'authorized' reproduction (*ibid.*: 1094). This assumes that the performance is overly determined by the authorial text. The term 'dramatic text' is also distinct from 'performance text'. The dramatic text refers to a 'play, script, music score, or dance notation that exists prior to being staged', Schechner (2002: 192-193) writes. The performance text, on the other hand, refers to that which takes place on the stage and which is experienced by the spectator (*ibid.*).

In considering the meaning of the phrase 'to perform', Schechner (2002:22) writes that it is a doing of something to a certain standard. 'In everyday life, "to perform" is to show off, to go to extremes, to underline an action for those who are watching. In the twenty-first century, people as never before live by means of performance'. Schechner also writes that performances are practised and rehearsed; they are 'twice-behaved behaviours', or 'restored behaviours' that involve recreation through repetition (*ibid.*). Within this repetitive restoration of behaviour, however, lies a paradox. As Roach (1995: 46) contends, '[N]o action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance. In this improvisatory behavioural space, memory reveals itself as imagination'.

If we understand performance as actions in everyday life, it is necessary to study what objects do and how this doing relates and interacts with other objects or individuals (Schechner 2002: 24). Sociologist Erving Goffman's work on the theatrical nature of social action and the roles we play in everyday life (in particular *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1959] and *Frame Analysis* [1974]) has frequently been cited in examinations of the organisation of 'talk' in accounts of online community activity, as well as in presentations of the self on the Internet.[15] Personal home pages and websites throughout the World Wide Web are clearly produced and intended for readership, or the presence of an audience, inviting comment and interactivity. Goffman's use of theatrical metaphors in his conceptualisation of 'ordinary' social action as performance therefore appears useful for a consideration of the context of the everyday theatricality of Internet use where personality or identity is managed 'in much the same way as an actor performs a role' (Lancaster 2001: 2). For Goffman, social interaction and communicative acts are skilled practised dramatic performances, which are motivated by the construction of appearances and impression management. As Goffman (1959: 244) asserts, we are all 'practised in the ways of the stage'. In order to refine our 'self presentation' or staging of self in everyday life, we utilise 'fronts'; 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance' (*ibid.*: 32). In order to get to this point where we are confident with our 'front stage' presentation of self we rely on 'back stage' activity, the behind the scenes spaces where we rehearse and prepare ourselves for our social roles.

Much of the value in Goffman's work, Silverstone (1999b:70) notes, is first located in the observation that 'all action is communication'. He adds,

> The second is that performance almost always involves idealization. The third is that the success of performance, in everyday life as on the bounded spaces of stage and screen, depends on the judgements and acceptance of an audience. (*ibid.*)

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[15] See for example, Miller 1995; Miller and Mather 1998; Cheung 2000; Hine 2000; Rutter and Smith 2000; and Lancaster 2001.

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, has, however, been accused of ignoring historical specificity. Goffman's notion of performativity, based on observations of Western social behaviour in the 1940s and 50s, implies that the performance of self is a universal condition, unaffected by economic, industrial contexts or social, historical shifts. Goffman thus imagines the concept of theatre, as Nightingale (1996: 131) asserts, 'in structural/functionalist terms': it is 'a location without a history', with the actor and the self performing in everyday life as mere characters. Interpretation of meaning from the performance of self in interaction is thus reduced to the level of micro concerns devoid of any larger outside cultural activity, which may otherwise provoke a questioning of 'the actor as a body or some other sign' (*ibid.*).

Silverstone (1999b) observes that the conditions of modernity have brought us the exaggeration of performative behaviours.[16] The saturation of media in modern society, in particular, has provided the resources through which individuals can imaginatively perform their identities within seemingly mundane everyday events (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998; Silverstone 1999b). The context of such performances which allow the individual to present him/herself to an audience of others has also created the possibility for continuous self-reflexivity. We now not only present ourselves to others through impression management, we 'reveal' ourself to ourself (Silverstone 1999b: 70-71). Moreover, this notion of self is manifold; we construct multiple identities that allow us to adapt to various cultural and historical locations. The performance of fandom can hence be understood as 'one of the many facets of the multiple self' (Sandvoss 2005: 47) and is distinguished from Goffman's concept of the self because it is a phenomenon that cannot be isolated from 'the industrial and technological context of the production of [the objects of] fandom' (Sandvoss 2005: 48).

The above discussion has set the tone for what will be a more thorough investigation of the important role that media consumption plays in shaping contemporary social experience and everyday performance. Abercrombie and Longhurst's work *Audiences* (1998) draws briefly on Victor Turner's important anthropological contribution to the field of performance studies. Turner's (1969; 1982) emphasis on 'social dramas', the rituals of daily life and the transformative reflexive potential of performance, in addition to his collaboration with scholar Richard Schechner, have played a significant role in the development of performance theory and in the establishment of a longstanding paradigm for performance studies (McKenzie 2001: 33-37). Any ethnographic project concerned with communities and audience participation with popular performance media such as television and new interactive technologies, warrants some explicit attention to these important theorists.

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[16] The term performative, as both a noun and an adjective, is complex and has various implications for its uses, particularly in postmodern discourse. In the latter half of this chapter I will explore, in more detail, philosopher J.L. Austin's (1962) concept of the performative, which is used to describe utterances that not only 'say' something but 'do' something.

1.2 RITUALS, PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMANCE GENRES: FROM THE LIMINAL TO THE LIMINOID

Victor Turner's (1969; 1982) anthropological observations of the symbolic ritual performances of Central African tribal villages provided him, and other performance scholars, with the theoretical tools through which to explore the efficacy of different types of cultural performance. Turner's concept of liminality is adapted from Arnold van Gennep's[17] work on the three phases of rites of passage: the preliminal, liminal and the post liminal. Turner focuses on the liminal phase, or what he calls the 'betwixt and between', the key phase of transition. Adapted from the Latin word 'limen' which translates as 'threshold', the liminal is a space that marks a 'transition between' the first phase and the third, as observed in the initiation ritual. This phase is characterised as a period of ambiguity, 'a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states' (Turner 1982: 24). The liminal phase is when life-changing transformative rites of passage occur. Turner writes about the playful possibilities in liminality, where there is an opportunity for the subversive and the ludic recombination of social structures.[18] Through collective action, a group can appear to transgress the norms of social order, turn them inside out and upside down. Turner (*ibid.*: 84) notes, 'in liminality people "play" with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from the unprecedented combinations of familiar events'. This kind of play can be seen as an expression of the *subjunctive* mood. There is a passage for the initiate from the '*indicative*' mood, a way of being which follows good 'rational' sense and scientific fact in the mundane world, to an immersion in the '*subjunctive*', or the 'anti-structure', which captures the wishes and desires of fantasy. As Turner writes, the subjunctive 'is a world of "as if" and "if it were so", not "it is so"' (*ibid.*: 84, emphases in original).[19]

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[17] See van Gennep, A. (1960[1908]) *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge.

[18] The term ludic is a variation of the Latin word 'ludus', meaning rule-bound behaviour. Roger Caillois uses the term ludus to describe a type of play that is at the opposite end of a continuum of behaviour. It is distinguished from 'paida', the Greek term for free play, or what Caillois describes as 'a kind of uncontrolled fantasy' or 'impulsive exuberance' (Caillois 1979: 13, cited in Schechner 2002: 95-96).

[19] 'Anti-structure', meaning the 'dissolution of normative structure', is a significant term Turner applies with reference to agrarian societies to describe the state of liminality and what Schechner (2002: 62) describes as the 'camaraderie' of 'communitas' (Turner 1982: 28). Communitas, both in its normative and spontaneous forms, implies an inclusive social structure in which all group members are in absolute identification or agreement. Some rituals hence have the capacity to create the conditions through which all group members experience a liberation from the constraints of the ordinary. Spontaneous communitas, as opposed to the normative kind, is defined in more utopian terms, as a powerful, magical immediate moment. Turner writes,

> Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people – friends congeners – obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as "essentially us" could sustain its intersubjective illumination (1982: 47-48).

This 'spontaneity' of feeling generated during ritual, however, is usually temporary. Schechner (2002: 62) summarises normative communitas as 'the sometimes dry and unfeeling display of group solidarity'. The

Questions around the theoretical application of the liminal to contemporary examples are important to address here. In larger scale contemporary complex societies the theoretical use of liminality, Turner (*ibid.*: 29) warns, 'must in the main be metaphorical' (Turner 1982: 29). Turner clearly argues that 'much confusion' can result from the theoretical mistreatment of liminality. The symbolic systems of agrarian societies are different from those that emerged after the Industrial Revolution. Turner therefore makes some distinction between the terms 'liminal' and 'liminoid', claiming that a close examination of forms of play is central to our understanding of these phenomena. Unlike contemporary daily rituals associated with media consumption, liminal religious rituals are considered serious, sacred, marked events. They are performed consciously, through a sense of duty, as part of sacred worship. Turner asserts that in small-scale societies ritual and myth 'are regarded as "work," precisely in this sense, what the Tikopia call "the *work* of the Gods" ' (*ibid.*: 30). Groups in agrarian societies may engage in unruly, transgressive behaviour or play in their 'liminal' collective action but this intervention is enacted within the boundaries of the formal initiation ritual which is understood to result in their permanent change as a person. Therefore, Turner argues, the domains of work and play in simple societies are not seen as separate activities.

Unlike the liminal, liminoid's transformative and subversive effects, on the other hand, are more temporary. Liminoid [resembling but not identical to liminal, (*ibid.*: 32)] phenomena are "commodified" forms and modern cultural experiences, associated with the many genres of high and low cultural performances, such as the theatre, industrial arts, literature, popular entertainment and leisure activities (i.e., films, carnivals or football matches). These liminoid genres, which would also include the genres across the medium of television and the Internet, are seen as 'playful' activities that involve optional choice on the part of the individual as opposed to the obligation or 'work' that is required of the tribal ritual.[20] For Turner, liminoid genres stand out from the liminal rituals as those which are 'play-separated-from-work', not 'play-and-work ludergy as a binary system of man's "serious" communal endeavor' (*ibid.*: 43). Hence, 'One *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid' (*ibid.* 55). For Schechner, theatre, as a phenomenon that is described as something in between leisure and work, an experimental cultural form of 'entertainment' (entertainment literally meaning to 'hold in between'), has some potential to reinstall the power of the liminal. Some characteristics of the 'sacred' liminal ritual, however, are noticeable in liminoid settings or secular ceremonies.

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group, in this case, must attempt to maintain the feeling of spontaneous communitas. This can result in a 'transformation of a charismatic and personal moment into an ongoing, relatively repetitive social system' (Turner 1982: 49). The official institutional nature of the Church, its ability to manipulate symbols and metaphors towards socio-economic ends, provides a good example of communitas as 'normative'. Some critiques, however, have surfaced around this 'inclusive' notion of communitas. Cohen's (1985: 55) argument about the ambiguous nature of symbols contends 'that some people can participate within the 'same' ritual yet find quite different meanings for it'.

[20] While play appears an obvious definable activity, there are a number of ambiguities that have surrounded theories of play. Brian Sutton-Smith's book *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) presents a useful overview and critique of this area of scholarship.

Schechner (2002: 47-48) writes that many contemporary rituals are both sacred and secular, such as the wedding ceremony, which involves religion, the transformation of a social identity (the individual passes from one stage of their life into another) and social festivity. Turner (1982: 55) also writes of the interrelationship between the liminal and the liminoid; 'when clubs become exclusivist they tend to generate rites of passage, with the *liminal* a condition of entrance into the *liminoid* realm'. When individuals enter the liminal realm, even through the context of engagement with liminoid phenomena, they are taken out of the ordinary conditions of everyday life, however momentarily. It is important to stress Turner's contention that with industrialisation and the 'division of the leisure sphere from the work sphere by the firm's clock' has come 'deliminalization' and hence a decrease in the 'powerful *play* component' that he attributes to agrarian rituals (*ibid.*: 85, emphasis in original). [21]

I want to make a connection now between media studies scholar Roger Silverstone's (1999b) use of the liminal as an underlying premise of cultural performance and relate this to a further examination of Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) distinction between three types of audience experience: simple, mass and diffused. [22] This discussion needs to be prefaced with a reference to Turner's theory of social drama and his emphasis on the importance of narrative and storytelling.

Drawing on a Ndembu village story about a drunken king who is beaten by his sons and later consoled by his daughter, Turner (1982: 72) argues that the listeners of the story (the children of the village who are now adults) have a frame of reference available to them from which they can, in his words,

> "inaugurate" a social drama, with a repertoire of "transitional" and "ending" motifs to continue the framing process and channel the subsequent developments. Just as the story itself still makes important points about family relationships and about the stresses between sex-and age-roles, and appears to be an emic generalization, clothed in metaphor and involving the projection of innumerable specific social dramas generated by these

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[21] It is significant that Turner (1982: 54) defines the 'experimental' and 'theoretical' sciences as well as universities and colleges as liminoid settings; these are optional 'privileged' places outside of the mainstream. They reside 'apart from the central economic and political processes', existing on the margins of central servicing institutions. These forms of the liminoid, like the more marginal practices of the avant-garde theatre, often have the potential to produce innovative and transgressive social critiques. This is the context in which the 'metaphorical' use of the liminal is most evident. In their capacity to generate self-reflexivity and collective consciousness, such liminoid places are where cultural transformations, revolutions, 'successful or not' are created (*ibid.*). Hence, theories surrounding the liminal quality of cultural performance, including the 'performance' of academic transgression and resistance, as McKenzie (2001) has noted, and Hills's (2002) work has pointed to, have created a strong presence for much scholarship in the field of performance studies. This 'presence' of course, brings attention to some noticeable contradictions regarding the notion of academic activity as occupying a 'marginal' space. I will return to McKenzie's and Hills's work and this important critique in the latter half of the chapter. Tony Bennett (1998: 3) also refers to Bourdieu's critique of academics who write about institutional power yet somehow consider themselves as exceptions. See Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[22] See also Shields's (2003) use of the liminal and Schroder's (1988) earlier application of Turner's concept of liminality for an examination of how Dutch and American audiences make meaning from the *Dynasty* series.

> structural tensions, so does it feedback [sic] into the social process, providing it with a rhetoric, a mode of employment, and a meaning.

Turner declares that stories such as this one provide the resource for cultural performance and social reflexivity.

> Life itself now becomes a mirror held up to art, and the living now *perform* their lives, for the protagonists of a social drama, a "drama of the living," have been equipped by aesthetic drama with some of their most salient opinions, imageries, tropes, and ideological perspectives. (*ibid.*:108).

Rather than limiting the description of 'story' to the elements of the Greek, Western notion of drama which contains a beginning, middle and an end, Turner (*ibid.*: 68) argues that the social drama is more 'a spontaneous unit of social process and a fact of everyone's experience in every human society'. He breaks down the social drama into four phases: 'breach, crisis, redress and *either* reintegration *or* recognition of schism'[23] (*ibid.*: 69). In summary, the breach phase marks an infraction of rules and norms of a social group or arena. A crisis emerges when the breach becomes visible to the public. Redress is the process of the resolution of the crisis. The final phase involves reintegration of the disturbed social unit or a social recognition of a breach that is irreparable. Turner adds 'This phase, too, may be registered by a public ceremony or ritual, indicating reconciliation or permanent cleavage between the parties involved' (*ibid.*: 71). Turner claims that all groups, universally, from family to nation, in small and complex societies, move through these phases, with some variation. In spite of Turner's insistence that he does not impose Aristotle's Western model of stage action upon the lived experiences of the Ndembu people or on other political examples in complex societies that involve struggle, Schechner (2002) argues there is a problematic reduction of all major political crises to a Western theatrical metaphor.[24] It is interesting to note, however, that what Schechner writes is useful about Turner's claims is Turner's reference to Schechner's own horizontal, numeral 8 feedback 'loop'[25] which illustrates the fluid, cyclical process of feedback between aesthetic and social dramas.

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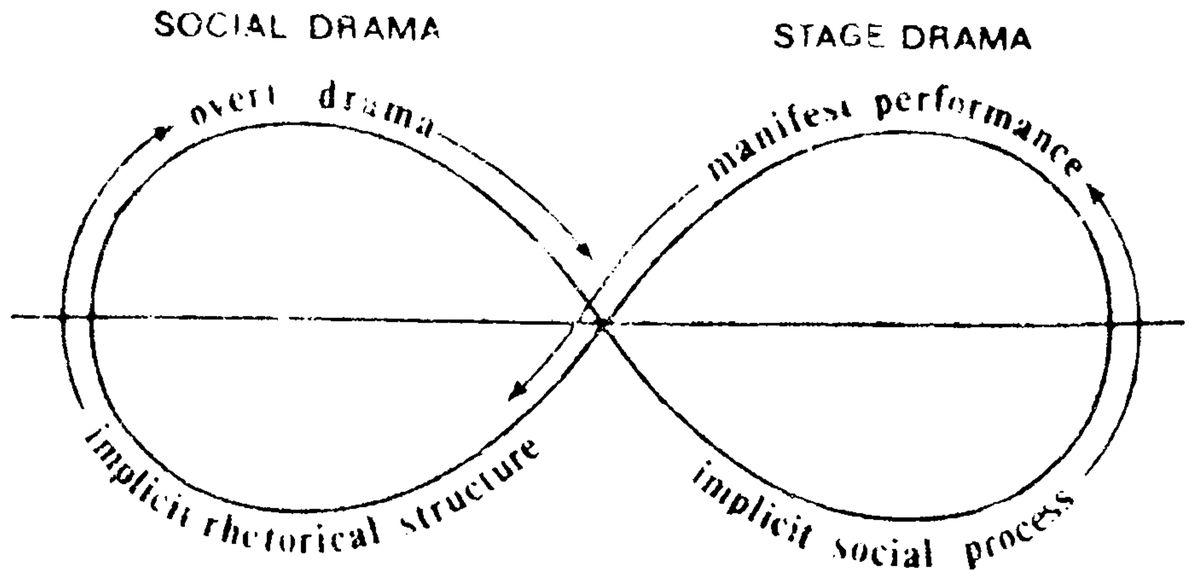
[23] The progression from breach to schism, Schechner notes, is also the underlying scheme of Greek tragedies, the Elizabethan theatre, and modern realist drama (2002: 67).
[24] Turner (1982: 106-107) also references Geertz's criticism of his theory of social drama.
[25] The diagram shown here has been reproduced from Turner's text (1982). A more recent, slightly altered version can be found in Schechner (2002).



As Turner notes, the arrows on the diagram above moving from the left to right represent the action of the four phases of the social drama. The arrows move across from the overt (visible) drama and down into the area of 'implicit social process' or the 'hidden social infrastructures' and then back up into the area of 'manifest performance' and back down again, and so on. This movement across spaces indicates a continuous process through which both social drama and stage drama, or aesthetic performance, shape and inform each other (Turner 1982: 73-74). Much of the 'transformation' that emerges happens when the ritualised social drama 'transforms' into something approaching aesthetic drama. In short, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 46) conclude, 'theatre turns into ritual and, conversely, ritual is formed by theatre'.

1.3 THE DIFFUSED AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

There is certainly a great deal of value in Turner's approach to social dramas for media studies. One could argue that the emphasis on the messages and rhetoric imbedded in the authored texts of aesthetic dramas/performances (Schechner's theoretical use of the loop refers specifically to the liminoid genre of theatre) as feeding back into the hidden infrastructure of the social drama and vice versa, resembles Silverstone's (1999b) ideas about mediation as an ongoing cyclical 'process'. This following quotation, for example, makes a direct connection to media's potential as sites for ritual and play:

> There are many ways in which we can see the media as being sites for play, both in their texts and in the responses that those texts engender. And not just in the endless thud of a computer game. Watching television, surfing the net, doing the crossword, guessing the answers in a crossword quiz, taking part in a lottery, all involve play. The media have the capacity, indeed they entirely depend upon that capacity, to engage an audience within the spaces and times that are distinguished – marked off – from the otherwise relentless confusions of everyday life. There is a threshold to be crossed each time we participate in the process of mediation. (Silverstone 1999b: 61)

Mediation is a complex term and has a plurality of meanings. As Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 63, citing McQual 1987) write, the performances of mass media are mediated, with media creating a space

> between us and realms of experience with which we cannot have direct contact; they interpose between us and institutions like the state or the law; they provide channels of contact; and they give information which allows us to form opinions of other people, nations or events.

In this respect, institutions of mass media have been understood as intervening time-space relations, occupying the role of interpreter or providing a window between individuals and the outside world. However, while mediation shapes identities and social relations, Giddens (1991: 4) argues that mediated experience should not be reduced to a realm of hollowness, as suggested in Baudrillard's (1983) sense of simulation and hyperreality. According to Giddens, the new world in which mediation is pervasive 'creates new forms of fragmentation and dispersal'; 'the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options' (1991: 5). With the 'collage effect' (*ibid.*: 26) of items introduced through the globalised media of television and newspapers, mediated experience therefore offers a culture of selection and choice, providing individuals access to a diverse range of experiences which they may otherwise never encounter, while simultaneously supplanting the 'real' experiences of everyday life (*ibid.*: 168). Media forms thus continuously provide individuals in the lived experience of their everyday world with 'materials to be worked on' for their self-identity projects (Barker 1999: 7).

This point reflects Silverstone's (1999b) suggestion that mediation should be thought of as an incomplete process (*ibid.*: 13-14). More complex than a fixed two step flow of communication from media institution to consumer, mediation involves the continuous 'engagement and disengagement with meanings which have their source or their focus in those mediated texts, but which extend through, and are measured against, experience in a multitude of different ways' (*ibid.*: 13). This understanding of mediation emphasises the circulation of meaning between producer and consumer. Mediation thus involves a participatory relationship; producers and consumers both 'act and interact', creating mediated meanings through primary and secondary texts and using those meanings in order to ask existential questions about mediated experience and the material world, while also creating a distance from its difficulties and challenges (*ibid.*: 13).

Silverstone (1999a: 77) suggests that this process of interaction can be explored through rhetoric. As a dimension of the media, rhetoric constructs the spaces of our everyday experiences. Television, Silverstone writes,

> can be seen through the filter of rhetorical theory as a medium, and not just in documentary, of persuasion – persuading its viewers to believe or to suspend disbelief, to accept the claims for verisimilitude as well as the claims, literally, to be heard, understood and accepted. (*ibid.*)

Television makes rhetorical and textual claims for 'attention, assent, and community' (*ibid.*: 78). Like the storyteller of the Ndembu village, television's narratives and rhetoric appeal to the attention of its audience who also speak the same language. This language can work on both cognitive and emotional levels where speaker and listener both define the meanings 'in and through a common ground'[26] (*ibid.*). 'The common places are where rhetoric meets and exploits common sense, sometimes through cliché, often through stereotype, mustering a framework of cognition and recognition without which attempts at persuasion are fruitless' (Silverstone 1999b: 35). Without a willing audience, however, rhetoric's performance fails in its attempts to persuade. Silverstone defines this meeting point between speaker and listener as 'commonplace' or 'commonplaces' (*ibid.*). Television genres and the stories they tell often symbolically reflect the familiar, yet at the same time, ironically, allowing a release from normal, everyday constraints. Commonplaces are both physical and symbolic, lived and imagined; media's rhetoric captures and fuels viewer's imaginations whilst continually shaping a collective conscience. The local expression of these imaginations through a culture's rituals, ceremonies, or the aesthetics of everyday cultural performances, however, can also be understood as social actions, or 'performances' that 'fuel' media's texts.

The emphasis on the continual social construction of stories, experienced through mediation, a cyclical reflexive process moving across threshold spaces that are both in and out of the everyday, calls attention to the notion of feedback as suggested in Schechner's model, yet opens further possibilities for understanding the more complex contemporary diffused audience experience (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998). Turner (1982: 112) writes, 'Ritual, unlike theatre, does not distinguish between audience and performers'. Theatre as a liminoid, commodified genre, one that is visited by voluntary choice and not obligation, has traditionally distanced performers and audience. In an effort to make a return to liminality, Schechner sees the potential in avant-garde experimental theatre where audiences participate in the theatrical performance in spaces other than the traditional stage, thereby enabling a more self-reflexive social experience. While the physical disintegration of space between audience and performer is possible in this instance, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 49) describe the problem of 'social' distance as a

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[26] It is significant that Silverstone's (1999a: 74) reference to the phrase 'common ground' which he uses to describe 'a sense of discursive space', one that contains text and audience ('the places and times of everyday life' and 'the place where meanings are negotiated and made'), is explicitly appropriated from Brenda Laurel's work *Computers as Theatre* (1993) which considers human-computer interaction through a theoretical model that incorporates theatrical performance. Referring to Clarke and Brennan's (1990) application of the notion of 'common ground to human-computer interfaces', in which 'a jointly inhabited "space" where meaning takes shape through the collaboration and successive approximation of the participants', Laurel (1993: 4) proposes that the interface 'is a shared context for action in which both [person and computer] are agents'.

more complex issue. The actor as performer takes on an *aura* in the performance that the spectator cannot. Abercrombie and Longhurst describe this type of audience experience as 'simple'. In this description they also include people who attend films, football matches and festivals. Performances for simple audiences occur during a fixed time and take place locally in public spaces; physical and social distance between audience and performer is generally great, and communication between parties is direct and unmediated. In addition, the attention of the simple audience is high; that is, the conditions noted above encourage an 'intense experience' (*ibid.*: 55).

Abercrombie and Longhurst's description of the mass audience, on the other hand, is characterised by mediated experiences of communication. While experiences of the simple audience are still important in contemporary society, the experience of being a member of the audience has changed. Performance events such as pre-recorded television broadcasts and radio programmes, or music and film, are not restricted to fixed temporal and spatial locations. The act of going to see a film is characteristic of some of the 'simple' audience experience, as it is an isolated event that takes place in a cinema where some kind of formal behaviour is expected. However, the pre-recorded medium itself creates the conditions where diverse audiences can consume the same film performance across global locations at various times. Mass audiences thus attend in global spaces, yet performances are now more often consumed privately, at the time of one's own choice, in the domestic sphere. Consequently, attention to the performance is less intense, distracted and more variable. Audiences can now buy or rent film videos and DVDs or record them from broadcast television. There is hence more control over the film viewing experience as audiences may pause, rewind, fast forward and rewatch all or selected sequences in their homes. A further fragmentation of the viewing experience is encouraged with the DVD format which offers a range of multiple viewing options, including directors' and actors' commentaries or 'behind the scenes' action. Abercrombie and Longhurst also argue that because of institutional and technological mediation there is greater social and physical distance between performers and audience in the mass audience experience.

The 'diffused audience' is another form of audience that is best understood through the 'Spectacle/Performance Paradigm' (SPP). This claim is not intended to separate or neglect the existence of the simple or mass audience, but to suggest that 'they take place against the background of the diffused audience' (*ibid.* 69). Again a process of feedback is suggested as, 'the three audience forms can feed off one another'. In a 'media-drenched' society that penetrates both public and private experience, communication for the diffused audience is neither direct nor mediated, but 'fused' (*ibid.*). The notion of performance and being a member of the audience is not then considered an exceptional or isolated event, but is constitutive of everyday life. The result is that people involved in casual events come to see themselves as performers as well as audience members. The two entities of the production of the spectacle and its consumption become so deeply infused into everyday social interactions that it becomes

difficult to distinguish between the two. As Silverstone's (1999b)[27] example of public and media participation in Princess Diana's funeral suggests, it is this '*invisibility* of performance' (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 70-73, emphasis in original), indeed the postmodern erosion of boundaries where the spaces between performers and audiences, producers and consumers, distinctions between genres, are now less concrete, that essentially characterises the diffused audience experience.

Abercrombie and Longhurst assert that the 'Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm' (IRP) that dominated earlier mass media research emphasised the distance between performance/audience, producer/consumer, and text/reader. The IRP thus stressed the importance of examining power relations in order to further our understanding of the organisation of society and modern social processes. While Abercrombie and Longhurst accept the underpinnings of the paradigm to a certain degree, they highlight its theoretical inability to cope with the changing nature of contemporary audiences and current media production practices which are increasingly fragmented and diversified. The trouble with the IRP is its focus on the unequal distribution of power as its *central* argument. Earlier studies of television audience reception such as Morley's *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980) they argue, moved away from the behavioural concerns (the 'Behavioural Paradigm') of the Dominant Text 'effects' research position, yet were still situated within the constraints of the IRP.[28] Studies that emphasised the text/reader, encoding/decoding model, were situated on the other end of the IRP continuum, 'The Dominant Audience' position, with a focus on whether audience members were incorporated into dominant ideology by their readings of media texts or whether they resisted textual positioning. In addition, as my discussion in Chapter 3 will examine in more detail, scholarly investigation that emphasised the subversive dimensions of fan activity such as 'textual productivity and reinvention of the media message' also fall within many constraints of the IRP (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 130). The overall argument of the IRP thus remains centred within the Marxist historical concerns of cultural studies (as in work conducted by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies): audiences are hence in a constant 'struggle' for power within their relationship to media. Within the confines of the IRP, power, it is implied, is exercised in a central 'relatively unitary way' (*ibid.*: 34). The difficulties of this assumption are most evident with empirical examples which attempt to establish where the foci of power resides, making it unclear exactly what the audience is supposed to be resisting.

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[27] Silverstone (1999b: 73-75) elaborates on how the media provided 'the tools and fantasies' which would construct Diana as the 'Queen of Hearts' and 'The People's Princess'. Media's suturing of the traditional royal mould that had previously been established within its own representation of the royal family therefore created the conditions for the audience to play with what Diana symbolically represented and thus 'perform' their version of 'Diana'. The result was a performance that took place in front of the media's cameras, which was then broadcast to a global audience and repeatedly played back to the nation. Hence the aesthetic performance feeds into the social drama, which then feeds back and transforms the aesthetic, thus offering a virtual mirrored image upon which the audience can reflect.

[28] I will examine some of this work in more detail in Chapter 3.

Diffused audiences 'are the result of the interaction of two processes, spectacle and narcissism' (*ibid.*: 77). Concerns around the struggle for power are still important for the SPP, but they are conceptualised through a different set of issues. Questions surrounding power relations are therefore re-considered through an analysis of identity formation and its relationship to spectacle, narcissism and performance. The notion of spectacle and its relationship to capitalism is integral to their paradigm because everything in the world can be perceived as objects of the gaze. The world's objects and events then take on the quality of performance that is continually constructed for the watching audience. They cite the common leisure practice of modern tourism and the desiring tourist gaze. The fascinated gaze at the spectacle, with reference to Guy Debord's *The Society of The Spectacle* (1995 [1967]) is related specifically to consumption practices across the terrain of the complex 'mediascape'[29] which is increasingly comprised of commodities. As Debord writes, 'The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images' (Debord 1970: 4, quoted in Chaney 1998: 42). In short, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 84) write, 'As the commodity form becomes more widespread, the spectacle becomes diffuse. It is all around and fragmented, diffused throughout and infused into everyday life – just like the diffused audience'. Important to the process of the spectacle is its relationship to 'the aestheticization of everyday life', a key feature of modern society, in which the value of commodities is not necessarily evaluated in terms of functionality but through their aesthetic qualities (*ibid.*: 85).

A narcissistic society is hence a consequence of the symbolic world of the spectacle. The authors are careful to remind the reader that their use of the term narcissistic is relatively restrictive. They refer to narcissistic 'social' behaviour and thinking not as it is suggested in the psychoanalytical application of the term, but within the wider context of the cultural whole. Rather than explore the psychoanalytical emphasis on the 'impossible desire' or 'unfulfilled yearning' that facilitated Narcissus's suicide when he could not possess his love, the authors draw more on the element of the Greek myth which emphasises Narcissus's love of his *reflection*. This fixation results in the removal of the boundary between Narcissus and the external world (1998: 88-90). In other words, Narcissus sees a reflection of himself as he looks toward the outside world. In this respect, the authors emphasise that it is the concept of self that is crucial to their conception of the diffused audience, whether the audience is real or imagined. 'There is no boundary between the self and the world of people and things and so what stands outside the self is merely a reflection, as in a mirror, of the self (as in Narcissus' stream)' (*ibid.*: 92). The existence of the self therefore must rely on the presence of outside objects and the audience, as the audience's function 'is to reflect the central self' (*ibid.*). The audience is thus theorised as something equivalent to Narcissus's nymph lover Echo who uses only her voice to

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[29] Abercrombie and Longhurst attribute their use of this term to Appadurai, A. (1993) 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in B. Robins (ed.), *The Phantom Public Sphere*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

repeat what others say, hence echoing Narcissus's last words before his death. 'Indeed, for the proper functioning of narcissism, the audience has to be imagined as contributing to the narcissist's image of him-or herself' (*ibid.*: 92-93). Performance and narcissism are linked through the importance of style, appearance and aesthetics, essentially constructing and aiding the formation of one's status and identity within society or a community. Narcissism thus becomes important in relation to more general notions of the performance of self-identity and self-reflexivity as suggested in accounts of social theory.

Theories of self-reflexivity also have implications for how we understand individual agency. As Chaney (1998: 108) notes, with reference to Bakhtin, the question of stability, individuality, or agency for the 'knowing or apprehending agent' in relation to the 'object known or apprehended' is problematic if agency is understood as 'dialogical'. He writes, 'The… [dialogical]… is used to summarise the ways in which each agent and object is in important respects constructed or constituted through engagement with the other….different cultural forms provide different opportunities for different types of reflexive participation' (*ibid.*). This observation gestures towards Giddens's (1991) proposal that the creation of self-identity in late modernity is a self-reflexive project, a movement away from the 'emancipatory politics' of political protests and strikes, to 'life politics', a process of continual self-reflexive work and effort defined through a set of self-narratives.

As the selling of commodities is influenced by the producer's ability to trade on the symbolic and aesthetic value of objects (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 97), one's self-identity project, or what Celia Lury (1999: 8) calls one's 'self-fashioning', is increasingly informed 'by technical, social and aesthetic knowledges, perhaps especially the latter' which individuals acquire as they participate in contemporary consumption practices (*ibid.*). It is hence this process of commodification, involving the transformation of objects into tradable aestheticised commodities and the construction of individuals as desiring, knowledgeable consumers, that relates to the creation of the diffused audience experience (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 96).

Lury (1999) for example, referring to Appadurai (1986), suggests that the ways in which these knowledges are distributed from producer to consumer determines the kinds of value individuals attribute to cultural objects. What is problematic here, Appadurai adds, is the consequence of the uneven distribution of aesthetic knowledge that occurs with difficulties in this communication. In this respect, 'the cultural drenching said to be characteristic of modern consumption does not make us all equally wet' (Lury 1999: 53). Appadurai (2003: 44) adds, however, that when there are 'discontinuities in the knowledge that accompanies the movements of commodities, problems involving authenticity and expertise enter the picture'. Appadurai argues that with the example of the trading of 'luxury' commodities, the distance between producers and consumers shrinks, 'so the issue of *exclusivity* gives way to the issue of

authenticity' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). A shift takes place in this instance, where there is a much more direct negotiation between producer and consumer that not only involves 'price' but also one of 'authenticity'. Whereas commodities were made exclusive in pre-modern conditions through long-distant movement and high transportation costs, the mass reproduction and technological advancements that define contemporary production practices make luxury commodities more easily available for middle-class consumers. A need to preserve exclusivity and create differentiation amongst a wealth of other commodities, now makes up a significant part of contemporary Western society's political economy of taste; hence we find there is an increasing need 'to complicate the criteria of authenticity' (*ibid.*: 45). This need can be understood as a consequence of supply and demand, the collaboration between producers and consumers as both parties 'collude in aestheticizing commodities' (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 97).

My exploration in Chapter 2, of the historical, economical and technological conditions that surround the production and reception of *The Sopranos,* for example, considers how the contemporary practice of television branding participates in this construction of authenticity and the creation of novelty products for niche audiences. The ways in which these processes of commodification shape wider cultural values and perceptions of quality, thus providing particular resources for the performance of audiencehood, informs my discussion in Chapters 6 and 7, which in part explores the ways in which online fans of *The Sopranos* negotiate perceptions of quality television with the more negative cultural perceptions of fandom. As my discussion above suggests, this is a complex negotiation that requires a range of consumer skills, including those involving acts of imagination.

1.4 ACTS OF IMAGINATION: SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND THE FAN CREATED NEWSGROUP

I have attempted to emphasise that the self-reflexive project is ongoing and continually maintained through dialogic interaction with other/s. To return to Abercrombie and Longhurst's focus on narcissism, individuals present 'themselves to others and, in doing so, are imagining how the others will see them' (1998: 95). Similarly, through this act of imagination 'as a social practice'[30] which extends beyond the boundaries of physical location (*ibid.*: 105), one performs for an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) 'who are of like mind and have similar tastes and attitudes' (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 115).

Lury (1999: 220, emphasis in original) suggests that in 'being an interactive audience and performing an identity in interaction' young people create themselves as youth by making visible 'identity *as a process*'. Fans' participation in online communities can also be understood as a process of self-discovery through performance with an imagined community of others; fans

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[30] See Appadurai 1993: 274, cited in Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 105.

not only discover '*who* they are' (Karen Lury 1995, quoted by Celia Lury 1999: 219, emphasis in original) through what and how they consume, the management of their fan identity crucially depends on their negotiation with diverse cultural texts as they are circulated through the unique temporal, spatial ordering of the Internet. That is to say, it is through one's additional questioning of '*where* they are' (*ibid.*), not strictly in the physical sense, but within the social dynamics of this interactive virtual fan community space, that the individual may further initiate their self-narrative. By focusing on such processes which are characteristic of expressions of the performance of audiencehood, as Nightingale (1996: 95) suggests, it is possible to form a more critical perspective about the proliferation of audience typologies and the use of defining variables. Hence concerns surrounding '[s]ocial class, gender, and ethnicity' may be more usefully reconsidered 'as important frameworks within which the performance of audience is articulated – shaping and privileging the modes adopted in the enactment of audience, but not explaining the process'.

Matt Hills's (2001a; 2002) observations about the fan related Internet newsgroup provide an exemplary illustration of recent fan studies scholarship that responds to the aims of the SPP. In considering the importance of emotions in the fan-audience experience and the role of imagination in constructing the fan community, scholars[31] have begun to turn to Hills's work and his concept of the 'community of imagination'. Hills (*ibid.*) argues that adopting Benedict Anderson's (1991) notion of the 'imagined community' for the analysis of online fan communities is inaccurate. For Anderson (*ibid.*: 6), nation is not constructed by its closeness of geographical location but by the ways in which its members imagine community. Members may never know or meet other individuals within this nation however, they imagine their existence in the community fellowship. In contrast to Anderson's 'imagined community', which is defined as 'a coincidence in the temporality of information and consumption' (Hills 2002: 180),[32] the coincidence that defines the 'community of imagination' is 'affective' (*ibid.*); it is the intense emotional connection fans have with a text which provides the basis for the virtual fan community to '[confront] and [refine] the relationships between individual fans and the text as object of their fandom' (2001a: 154). Hills's 'community of imagination' therefore

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[31] See for example, Harrington and Bielby (2005), and Sandvoss (2005). I will discuss in more detail in the concluding chapter Hills's (2002) own extension of Harrington and Bielby's (1995) earlier work in this area.

[32] Anderson (1991: 35) explores the impact of the media in the shaping of social relations and observes it was 'print capitalism' that enabled new ways for fraternity to link meaningfully with power and time. Media therefore feeds the imagination of its audience by continuing the unity of community through its representations. The phenomenon of newspaper consumption has thus become a 'mass ceremony' with its significance comparable, according to Hegel, Anderson notes, to the religious ritual of morning prayers. The daily ritual of reading is performed in private, 'Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands of (or millions) of others whose existence he is confident, yet whose identity he has not the slightest notion' (*ibid.*).

> constitutes itself precisely through a common affective engagement, and thereby through a common respect for a specific space… Alt.tv.X-Files offers one such instance in which similar imaginative material determines the particular narratives which remain constitutive of the group: narratives of anticipation and speculation, narratives of information, dissemination and status, narratives of detection, and narratives of conspiracy. (Hills 2002: 180)

The virtual newsgroup is thus perceived as a unique space, providing fans 'continual access to fandom's affective realm: a 'space' in which what matters to the fan can be taken for granted as being shared significance' (2001a: 148). The newsgroup space, unlike the face-to-face routines within the fixed, ritually bounded fan convention, offers ongoing opportunities for fans to reaffirm their fan identity to others who, like them, have strong emotional attachments to their object of fandom. Hills's comparison of the fan convention to Durkheim's account of the religious ritual, with its emphasis on an intensity of collective experience that 'brings about a state of effervescence that alters the conditions of psychic activity' (Durkheim 1995: 386, quoted in Hills 2001a: 148), evokes Turner's 'neo-Durkheimian' (Couldry 2003: 34) assertion of the commonality between the liminal ritual (and 'communitas') and contemporary liminoid settings. Traditionally, exclusive clubs such as fandoms, which involve certain rites of passage (and hence an entrance into the liminal realm through liminoid phenomena), create a separation for members from the norms of everyday life, thus placing an emphasis on a division between labour and leisure spheres. The fan convention, Hills (2001a: 148, citing Jenkins 1992) asserts, thus '[reinforces] fan sentiments', while also '[sustaining] a separation of 'fan' identity from non-fan identity'. While the newsgroup also reaffirms fan identities, it presents a challenge to the underlying premise of the theory of liminality,[33] as places of work within contemporary digitised societies are often the sites fans inhabit when they express their fan identities through play with favoured media texts. It is therefore the 'ongoing possibility for sociality', of the newsgroup experience, that illustrates a disintegration of 'the sacred/profane separation which underpins fan cultural identity by allowing fan expression and fan identity to leak out into, and potentially permeate the fan's everyday life' (Hills 2001a: 148-149). Newsgroups are thus readily available technological spaces, created by fans, where individuals can not only engage in the pleasurable exchange of information about their favourite fan objects, they can also defend themselves 'against the possible 'otherness' or even 'alienness' of the discursively inexplicable intensity and emotionality of fandom' (2002: 180). Making the fan-self visible through textual performance in the newsgroup allows fans to be self-reflexive about this intensity, as they give voice to the ' 'almost' non-verbalisable fan experience' (*ibid.*).

This conception of the community of imagination presents a series of challenges to theories of cultural performance, including, as mentioned above, Turner's theory of liminality, with respect

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[33] This challenge is implied through Hills's comparison to the religious ritual but not explicitly addressed as such. However, the observation about the blurring of work and play as posing a challenge to the theory of liminality is considered by McKenzie (2001: 93-94), whose scholarship will be briefly explored in the next section.

to the liminoid, which depends upon a distinction between the spheres of work and play and assumes transgression, however temporary, through transformation from the space of the ordinary to the space of the liminal (McKenzie 2001). As Hills (2001a: 149) explores, fan studies which place an emphasis on fans' tactical poaching of spaces (see my discussion in Chapter 3) also rely on a theoretical model of transgression and resistance, which is unsuitable for an analysis of the diffused audience experience, as the newsgroup is a fan owned space available for the fan-consumer 'to respond to the texts of popular culture'.

It is important at this point in the chapter to consider how these challenges prompt further questions about how the emotionally intense ' 'almost' non-verbalisable fan experience' finds expression through discourse as individuals perform their fan identities. The following discussion will attempt to work through some of these concerns through an exploration of the theory of performativity.

1.5 PERFORMANCE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND THE CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY

1.5.1 Judith Butler - Merging transgressivity and normativity

'CAN SAYING MAKE IT SO?' (Austin 1962: 7)

In an attempt to understand the performative dimension of everyday life and ritual behaviour, performance studies scholars have turned to J.L. Austin's view of speech acts (1962). Austin's concept of performative utterances posits that language and speech function as powerful forms of authoritative action which transform a situation, as illustrated in the heterosexual marriage ceremony in which the utterance 'I pronounce you man and wife' idealises the heterosexual bond. Derived from the word 'perform', 'it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something' (Austin 1962: 6-7). When the bride or groom during a wedding ceremony utter the phrase 'I do', in saying the words they 'are *doing* something – namely, marrying, rather than reporting something, namely that they are marrying' (*ibid.*: 12-13, emphasis in orgininal). Austin's performative speech acts therefore effect change. In this respect Austin makes a distinction between the constative utterance, which refers to a description of something as true or false, and the performative utterance. Austin proceeds to write that things have 'to be right or go right if we are said to have happily brought off our action' (*ibid.*:14). However, if something goes wrong or if the performative utterance fails to deliver the action, Austin claims the utterance is not 'false' but 'unhappy', or a form of 'infelicity' (*ibid.*: 18-19). All conventional acts, according to Austin, have the potential for the ill of infelicity.

Performativity is a concept that Judith Butler has discussed at length in her theoretical works on identity, gender performance and queer theory. Her article, 'Performative Acts and Gender

Constitution' (1990a) which precedes the frequently cited text *Gender Trouble* (1990b) , first proposed that gender is something learned through social discourse. Appropriating Austin's concept of performative utterances, Butler writes that performatives construct and constitute social subjects. In *Gender Trouble,* Butler writes, '…gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed' (1990b: 25). Gender then is performative, an iterative act, a citation, through which the social subject or 'agent' dramatically embodies existing cultural significations. This act is not enacted as a matter of innovative individual choice or will (as she suggests is characteristic of 'performance', a wilful social action) but one that reflects prior social sanctions and conditions. This also means that gender performance involves

> a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture: indeed we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. (Butler 1990a: 273, cited in McKenzie 2001: 166)

Butler also comments in the earlier article (1990a) that the constitution of gender resembles 'theatrical' performances. As Jon McKenzie (2001: 167) notes, the comparison to the theatrical first involves a direct citation of Turner's work that is not explicit in her later text, *Gender Trouble*, but is mentioned briefly in a footnote.[34] For the purpose of the argument here I will repeat the earlier quotation as highlighted in McKenzie:

> In what senses, then, is gender an act? As anthropologist Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is **repeated**. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation. When this conception of social performance is applied to gender, it is clear that although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylised into gendered modes, this "action" is immediately public as well. (Butler 1990a: 277, cited in McKenzie 2001: 167, emphasis in McKenzie)

The passage above contrasts Butler's later clear separation of performance and performativity in the first publication of 'Critically Queer'[35] where performance is defined as intentional, wilful choice and is distinguished from the citational performative. McKenzie adds that Butler's earlier use of Turner's social drama and Schechner's theatrical acts is significant, as it challenges the authors' original intentions, which is to locate a theory of liminal performative genres and social acts as transgressive, as playing with and turning social norms 'upside-down'. Butler's concept of performativity, theorised across numerous works, in contrast, argues for 'both the *transgressivity and the normativity* of performative genres' (McKenzie 2001: 166, emphasis added). McKenzie's close reading of Turner argues that Butler's application of Turner's theory

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[34] See McKenzie's own footnote about this reference (2001: 284).
[35] See Butler, J. (1993) 'Critically Queer', *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, vol. 1, pp.17-32.

of ritual and social drama for gendered performance forces a type of emphasis on repetition and compulsory routine behaviour, which Turner would contest (McKenzie 2001: 167).

McKenzie's reading of Butler's (1990a) earlier text regards the reinscription of Turner and then Schechner as something positive, or usefully 'subversive'. Butler's subversive move, however, has been previously misinterpreted by her readers. As McKenzie observes, Butler's works on gender performance has been a frequent 'site' for performance studies 'citation'. Butler makes a conscious attempt at correcting the misuse of her earlier work, which cited that drag was an example of performativity (Butler 2003: 156). When *Gender Trouble* was published, critics who were exploring gender construction and its connection to consumer goods and fashion, eg. 'clothes make a woman', the idea of drag performativity as subversive earned a considerable amount of academic currency (*ibid.*). In addition, Butler (*ibid.*) adds, the queer movement's central concerns with 'theatrical agency' also appropriated *Gender Trouble* for their interests. To situate the issue of poststructuralist 'performative' play[36] within the context of the field of performance studies, McKenzie (2001: 169) claims that the misreading of Butler's theory of performativity as 'transgressive' is reminiscent of what has become a 'norm', or the paradigmatic use of liminality. McKenzie argues that the conflation of Butler's theory as transgressive, at the expense of focussing on her 'stress on performativity as both normative and punitive' (*ibid.*),[37] reflects the paradigmatic lecture machine, or the institutional reading machine that has normalised deviation through its celebration of resistance. Butler's subversiveness, however, for McKenzie, actually lies in her challenge to the 'liminal-norm'.

McKenzie's further reading of Butler reveals her move in a later publication of 'Critically Queer' to point out the possible 'convergence' of performance and performativity:

> It may seem [...] that there is a difference between the embodying or performing of gender norms and the performative use of discourse. Are these two different senses of 'performativity,' or do they converge as modes of citationality in which the compulsory character of certain social imperatives becomes subject to a more promising deregulation? (Butler 1993: 231, quoted in McKenzie 2001: 170).[38]

Butler's use of the term 'performance' in this instance thus retains a sense of embodiment yet restores the repetition that she read in Turner's theory of ritual and social drama. McKenzie argues that Butler's stress on repetition can also be linked to Schechner's emphasis on restored behaviours, 'the theory that all performances are rehearsed, recited, reactualized' (McKenzie 2001: 170). We can understand this to mean that 'gender and more generally, all subject formation, entail a normative ensemble of restored behaviours and discourses, a mundane yet

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[36] I am referring to Derrida's poststructuralist emphasis on the power of performative writing. See Derrida, J. (1998) *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
[37] McKenzie argues this also reflects performance scholars' neglect of Lyotard's concept of performative legitimation or performance as a normative process (2001: 169).
[38] The version of 'Critically Queer' which McKenzie references here is different from the 2003 version noted in my bibliography. See 'Critically Queer' (1993) in *Bodies that Matter*.

punitive regime of performances and performatives, a sedimented stratum of acts and words always repeated for the *n*th time' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

This understanding of subjectivity emphasises performance as both transgressive and normative and places a stress on agency as 'an effect of performative citationality' (*ibid.*: 179). This agency is located within the diversification of subject positions that exist across the performance stratum where 'hybrid, hyphenated subjects rapidly emerge and immerge, passing through a variety of subject positions and switching quickly between innumerable language games' (*ibid.*: 179-180). McKenzie's close consideration of Butler is useful in providing background context to her theory of gender performance which relates it more specifically to her own 'transgressive' use of Turner and Schechner. By considering performance studies political investments in liminality, it also becomes clear that performance studies use of Butler resembles similar tendencies of academic performativity within cultural studies (see Hills 2002: 159; and 201-202). In considering the aims of this project, it is certainly helpful to refer to Butler's emphasis on the constructedness of social subjectivity, and how this experience relates to the diverse ways in which audience members may ' 'speak' their culture, 'speak' their experiences, 'speak' the forces that have formed them' (Nightingale 1996: 103). The reiteration of discourse through repeated performance, therefore can be seen to perform important cultural work, as in the case of the maintenance of gendered identity. McKenzie's reading of Butler suggests that an analysis of such citationality should not over prioritise the subversive potential of performance, as suggested in Turner and Schechner's notion of the experience of the 'subjunctive', but might be interpreted, as Lancaster's (see Lancaster 2001: 159) work on *Babylon 5* fans suggests, as reconfiguration that facilitates reflexivity about one's place within the 'indicative'.

For McKenzie, Butler's suggestion of a convergence of discursive performatives and embodied performances therefore gestures towards and informs his ideas for a new general theory, which can accommodate three areas of performance: 'organizational, cultural, and technological' (McKenzie 2001: 12). By considering how these areas inform each other and reconfiguring their own performance paradigms (ie., performance management, performance studies and technological performance), McKenzie's (performative) proposal for a general theory of performance strives to 'avoid building a reading machine out of binary oppositions while unfolding performance in other ways as well' (*ibid.*). While McKenzie's larger aims are admirable,[39] it is worth questioning whether this reading of Butler, and hence a 'general theory'

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[39] Lancaster's (2001) examination of *Babylon 5*, which explores the performance qualities of interactive fantasy games from character based card and board games to CD-Rom role-playing games, appears to reflect McKenzie's emphasis on examining the relationship between technological and cultural performance and thus signals some attention to McKenzie's larger project. I tend to agree with Hills's (2002: 41-43) observations, however, that Lancaster's approach to fans' writing of fan fiction presents some contradictions. Lancaster refers to Schechner's notion of 'strips of behaviour' in Chapter 5 when exploring the ways in which fans shape their fan fiction texts, as they restore the original performance and reconfigure it in new ways. Lancaster discusses how fans perform within the *Babylon 5* universe 'by taking their favourite characters and placing them in new stories' thereby reflecting fans' own needs and

of performance, can fully account for the specific cultural, social and emotional processes that contribute to performances of fandom. Hills's (2002) critique of Butler, which situates poststructuralist theories of identity in direct relation to the analysis of fan cultures, is far less complimentary than McKenzie's. Hills does not identify her convergence of performance and performativity yet makes a move to reconsider the terms and in doing so presents a detailed set of questions with respect to the subject of fan agency. What Hills's (2002) exploration of fan impersonation via theories of performativity and consumption therefore does, which McKenzie's investigation does not, is offer an alternative level of enquiry which is less abstract and more relevant to a range of fan practices. In the next section I will attempt to capture some of the key points of this position.

1.5.2 Fan subjectivities and 'performative consumption'

The tone of McKenzie's critique of the 'liminal norm' bears an interesting resemblance to Hills's project throughout *Fan Cultures* (2002). Hills (2002: 8) identifies cultural studies' creation of a series of 'moral dualisms' that emerge from 'a view of the cultural world which constructs and focuses on two clear sets of 'good' and 'bad' phenomena'. Much like the academic use of Butler, 'Fandom is *used*' (*ibid.*: 10, emphasis in original) for political means, 'cut to the measure of the space which cultural studies' discourses allow it' (*ibid.*). In a defensive move to legitimate the fan-audience within the academic canon, earlier studies have thus constructed the fan subject as 'good' (who, in their material production, actively resists consumption practices) against the ordinary 'bad' consumer (the imagined 'passive' audience) (*ibid.*: see pp. 30 & 70).[40] Rereading the work of Theodor Adorno, Hills's thesis therefore conceptualises the 'fan-as-consumer', supported by the idea of the 'dialectic of value', a phrase that tolerates the contradictions between fans' intensely personalised use-value and the monetary capitalist market exchange-value.[41] Hills's challenge to poststructuralist theories of identity emerges from this premise.

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desires. The focus is thus on how fans enter an 'alternative universe' through their assertion for 'individual authorial claims' (Lancaster 2001: 131 & 134). He adds that this 'performance of fantasy allows fans to see the world without from within the fantasy' (*ibid.*: 158-159). This approach suggests a sensitivity to McKenzie's criticism of performance studies' over celebration of the transgressive potential of liminality as the transformation experienced by the fan is one that situates them back within the indicative, the realm of 'it is'', where social structures remain firmly in place. In this case liminality is also theorised, in McKenzie's (2001:168) words as he references Butler, 'in terms of a time/space of 'normalization' '. In addition to Schechner's work, Lancaster draws significantly on Jenkins (1992), and similarly adopts de Certeau's model of consumer appropriation thus repeating the cultural studies emphases on issues of audience struggle in relation to producers of popular culture. One could argue that this move presents a problematic contradiction as de Certeau's model assumes 'resistance' through 'tactics' as fans stake their 'individual authorial claims' (Lancaster 2001: 134). The potential for theorising the blurring of the subjunctive and the indicative, as moods that are not always in opposition to each other 'but as intimately related to an imperative mood which commands "it must be" ' as McKenzie asserts (2001: 168), is made problematic as de Certeau's framework suggests there is a clear distance between producer/owner and fan/poacher. My discussion in Chapter 3 will consider other examples that construct this problem.

[40] I will explore the implications of this tendency in fan studies in a more detailed discussion in Chapter 3.

[41] See, in particular, Hills 2002, Chapter 1: Fan cultures between consumerism and 'resistance'.

Hills's (2002: Chapter 8) exploration of his use of the term 'performative consumption' refers to his earlier examination of why discourses of 'cult' and religiosity are used in many fan cultures. Hills observes that in addition to the rational, objective discourse fans often use when attempting to explain or legitimate their fandom, fans may also deploy religious and devotional metaphors.[42] This borrowing becomes a display of what Hills calls 'neoreligiosity' (cf. Hills 2002).[43] Hills argues that a focus on neoreligiosity offers a space through which fan studies can begin to consider how fans' use of religious discourses reflects the more complex affective experience of cult fandom, an area which has often been marginalised in fan studies in favour of prioritising a fully knowing, 'rational' fan subject. This complexity can be observed in *The Sopranos'* fans' neoreligious use of the discourse of auteurism. Hills observes, for example, that the almost universal construction across various media cults of the auteur figure provides a 'locus of 'charisma' and coherence' which bears some connection to 'cults' that form powerful affective interpersonal relationships around charismatic figures (*ibid.*: 126).[44] The tendency for *Sopranos* fans to exhibit acts of devotion toward the TV auteur David Chase is common, as some of my discussion in Chapter 6 explores, and appears to reflect Hills's (*ibid.*: 122) assertion that 'religious discourses are more transparently based on expressions of communal faith which

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[42] Hills references Cavicchi's (1998) ideas around fans' use of religious discourse in their narratives of fan 'conversion' stories (Hills 2002: 118). See Cavicchi, D. (1998) *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. A recent email correspondence from the fan web-host of 'The Chase Lounge' (see http://www.thechaselounge.net/) similarly illustrates how fans use the conversion narrative to express their continuing 'faith' in the object of fandom. Consider the following extract, in which the web-host makes a bid to other forum members to convert new potential *Sopranos'* fans to join in a post Season Six re-watching of the entire series:

> Of course there is no way to recapture the feeling and excitement that comes with seeing an episode for the first time (unless, like Uncle Junior, we pretty much see everything for the first time . . . all the time!) But watching the series over, while mindful of the ending, has its own appeal. And I will be watching each episode with my brother, who has still seen very little of the show but has indicated his willingness to submit to my brainwashing. I encourage others to find a friend or family member who they could introduce to the series this way. Afterall, Sunday is a day for communion all around, and being a Sopranos missionary is the next best thing to being a Sopranos virgin.:)
>
> (July 8, 2007)

[43] By adopting this term, Hills moves away from focussing on fandom purely through a direct analogy with Church or religion, which assumes a quality of social stability and essentialism. Neoreligious discourses of 'cult' in media fandoms are therefore not interpreted 'as the 'social relocation' of religion' (2002: 119), but can be understood as creating an experience that is 're-articulated and reconstructed within the discursive work of fan cultures' (*ibid.*: 129). A media cult's neoreligious devotion indicates a dialogic relationship as one stigmatised group (fandom) draws on another stigmatised group (religion) in order to perform cultural work.

[44] Hills draws on Durkheim's sociological definition of religion to explore this area. (See for example, Durkheim, E., (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.) With respect to the comparison Hills makes between the religious cult and the media cult, he refers to Marty's (1969) definition of the "religious-proper 'cult'". The 'sect' is distinguished by Marty because it ' 'negatively' sets itself apart from society, 'providing the individual with a pure and integrative set of beliefs and practices'. Cults, however, which generally form around 'charismatic persons or clans' are 'positively-oriented', (Marty 1969: 391, quoted in Hills 2002: 126) that is, they are 'integrative against the backdrop of a 'depersonalised' society, and are not necessarily ideologically opposed to the value systems of this society' (Hills 2002: 126). See Marty, M.E. (1969) 'Sects and cults', in N. Birnbaum and G. Lenzer (eds) *Sociology and Religion*. New York: Prentice-Hall.

do not allow notions of 'proof' or 'evidence' to come into play'. When relying on rational discourses such as those that privilege textual aesthetics, fans thus attempt to 'anchor their 'self-absent' imagined subjectivity'[45] which otherwise cannot fully allow them to articulate the reasons for affection to their object of fandom (*ibid.*:123). Neoreligious discourses, such as those circulating around the auteur, therefore function to allow a certain relaxation of this justification, as it is generally fans 'as part of the cultural stigmatisation of 'excessive' fandom' who are 'called upon to account for their pleasures and attachments' (*ibid.*). As Hills adds, however, this 'practical unconsciousness'[46] does not unproblematically achieve legitimation for the fan culture, as the use of culturally devalued religious terms, ironically, potentially reintroduces 'the taint of irrationality' associated with religion (*ibid*).

In relating the emphasis of this discussion to his critique of Butler, Hills argues against Nightingale's (1994) assumption that performativity can provide a theoretical solution to the audience-text relation as improvisation. Nightingale thus replaces 'the 'Church' analogy' (Nightingale 1994: 1, cited in Hills 2002: 158) often associated with fan communities, with the more secular theory of performativity, asserting that fan performance enacts 'the contradictions of capitalism' (Nightingale 1994: 1, cited in Hills 2002: 158). Hills questions, however, whether this total rejection of church 'can entirely displace the metaphors of religiosity that fans have used to make sense of fan experiences' (Hills 2002: 158). By completely disregarding neoreligiosity and substituting it with performativity, the theorist creates an obvious paradox, as fans' use of religiosity is directly related to the non-volitional, citational 'performative' (*ibid.*).

Hills argues that a reconsideration of Butler's separation of performance and performativity, rather than using the terms interchangeably, is a more productive move when considering fan cultures. Where McKenzie's positive reading of Butler's convergence of the terms locates agency directly through non-volitional repetition, and not as something that 'preexist[s] the deed' (Butler 1990a: 25), Hills asserts that choice and thus agency, is available to fans before they occupy the 'iterable space of fan cultural identity' (2002: 160). He uses the example of fans' talk about the beginnings of their fandoms. Although these descriptions are performative (borrowing religious or rational discourses) and thus non-volitional, the beginnings themselves

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[45] Hills describes self-absence as

> a moment of self-suspension and radical hesitation. We are confronted by a moment where the subject *cannot* discursively and 'rationally' account for its own fan experience, and where no discourse seems to be available which can meaningfully capture the fan's 'opening of oneself to another's experience', or, indeed, to a mediated text. (2002: 7)

[46] This term refers to Jancovich's (1990: 17, quoted in Hills 2002: 123) reference to Giddens's definition of 'practical consciousness' which describes the way in which individuals may interpret cultural phenomena in their daily life but may not be able to discursively explain these processes. 'Practical unconsciousness' refers more specifically to the example of fans and the discourses they rely on to explain their emotional attachments and pleasures to their objects of fandom, and not the processes of interpretation (Hills 2002: 123). Fans' imagined subjectivity of self-absence, and hence their use of aesthetic or religious discourses, is therefore seen as an example of practical unconsciousness because it 'consists of all the things that actors tacitly *do not know*....but which nevertheless still allow them to 'go on' in their subcultural and subjective activities' (*ibid.*).

'are precisely points of non-iteration which *precede* any iterable fan identity' (*ibid.*). In this respect, unlike the constitution of gender, fandom is seen as possessing 'a moment of 'emergence' rather than always already being citational' (*ibid*). Attending to the dialectical nature of fandom, performative consumption, unlike Butler's theory of performativity, allows a closer recognition of what Hills calls these 'doubled fan claims' which can be read through fans' display of non-volitional volition (*ibid.*: 159): although fans are self-absent, they are also 'wilfully/volitionally committed to their objects of fandom', and are highly self-reflexive through this commitment. 'Each and every expression of fan identity is hence both a non-volitional citation *and* the (consumerist) 'choice' of a volitional fan-subject' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). Rather than perceiving fans as cultural dupes 'whose belief in their own agency is mistaken' or as subjects reduced to 'iterated and repeated discourse', the question of agency is addressed not as something 'which fans do or do not 'possess'...but rather as a claim that can be made at certain points in time but not at others' (*ibid.*).

While I would argue that McKenzie's reading of Butler does not suggest that the (fan) agent vanishes completely through iterated and repeated discourse, Hills's argument presents an insightful alternative to the more general assumptions of poststructuralist theories of identity which place an emphasis on 'processes of subjectivization in which human beings have little or no agency against the power of discourse, to resist or transform dominant discourses and therefore to produce new identities' (Roseneil & Seymour 1999: 4-5, quoted in Thomas 2002: 24). In considering the specificity which supports the notion of 'performative consumption', Hills (2002: 171) argues that fan performances, such as practices of impersonation or those of the newsgroup, re-enact 'the self-reflexive/self-absence contradictions of fandom'. Hence performative consumption 'dramatises the fans' self-absence, blurring moments of the volitional subject ('master of the text') and the non-volitional 'disciple' of the text' (*ibid.*:170). What I find particularly engaging, with respect to this position, is Hills's challenge to the narrative of performativity, which assumes that the performance of gender (or nation, ethnicity, etc.) can be equated with performances of fan identity which are defined through their affective relationship to objects of fandom, and which are characterised by the fans' inability to communicate 'a conscious self knowledge' (Hills 2002:167) about the origins of this attachment. Hills's appropriation of D.W. Winnicott's theory of the 'transitional object' provides further support for this claim and will be examined in more detail in the concluding chapter.

1.6 SUMMARY

This chapter provided an overview of literature and key concerns which Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) address in their proposal for the 'Spectacle/Performance Paradigm'. In an effort to draw attention to the significant place that Turner and Schechner have occupied in the field of performance studies, I explored Turner's observations of the agrarian ritual and his appropriation of the concept of liminality and social dramas, all of which have been taken up, in

varying degrees, in media studies scholarship, and as McKenzie observes, predominantly in the field of performance studies. This led to a further interrogation of Abercrombie and Longhurst's concept of the more complex contemporary diffused audience experience, best understood through the 'SPP', which prioritises questions about self-reflexivity, identity formation and reformation. By turning to Hills's more recent comprehensive contribution to fan studies scholarship, I drew attention to the question of the role of fan affect in the diffused audience experience, which was illustrated through Hills's example of the newsgroup phenomenon. I extended the investigation about the role of affect in fan performance and performativity, by examining Butler's work, and McKenzie's optimistic reading of Butler's own performative use of Turner and Schechner. While both McKenzie and Hills both also engage in academic performativity to pursue similar aims, I argued that McKenzie's position was limited in its more general approach to a theory of performance, which was unable to take account of the specific nature of the fan subject, with respect to the role of affect.

In the next chapter I will return to the subject of how both producer and consumer may collude in the processes of commodification, within a more detailed discussion about how *The Sopranos*, as an extension of the US 'quality' TV tradition, has participated in the construction of commodity authenticity, uniqueness and exclusivity. I will thus consider how *The Sopranos'* 'performance' of 'quality' commands the attention of its willing and media literate, reflexive consumer fan-audience.

Chapter 2: *The Sopranos* and US 'quality' television

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Television studies appropriation of the term 'quality' has generally been acknowledged as a highly self-conscious practice,[47] one that, as Lyn Thomas (2002: 199) has asserted, is used 'to present a discursive construction rather than a positive evaluation of the texts under discussion'. The wide-ranging industrial, audience, journalistic and scholarly references to 'quality', in the context of debates concerning US popular television, tend to reflect 'television's ongoing negotiation of the tension between economics and aesthetics' (Williams 1994: 142, citing Feuer 1984: 38). Critical attention to the relationship between the specific historical, economic and industrial circumstances of commodity production and the textual production of 'quality' television programmes, has thus remained a crucial concern for much television studies scholarship since the publication of Feuer *et al.*'s (1984) frequently cited collection, *MTM: "Quality Television"*.[48] My intention here is therefore not to engage in an uncritical, celebratory discourse about *The Sopranos*, but to examine some of the conditions that have enabled *The Sopranos* to stake and maintain its claim to the US quality television tradition. I will do this by first briefly reflecting upon the historical, industrial contexts which informed the earlier production of US quality programmes and hence established 'the paradigm of quality television' (Williams 1994: 142) that has continued to thrive and attract a wealth of scholarly interest. I will then turn to some extratextual materials that have focussed on the show's creator, executive producer and frequent director-writer, David Chase, in order to consider how such discourse contributes to the construction of the 'TV auteur'. As I explored in Chapter 1, this concept is highly valued in many fan communities[49] and supports HBO's (Home Box Office) image as a premium US cable channel that proposes to offer viewers an alternative to the mass-produced televisual norm. In asking how the series' formal elements assist in communicating its aspirations to quality, I will consider how the series engages with intertextuality and referentiality in order to map out an intensive self-reflexive critique. These strategies work to emphasise the notion of 'art television'[50] while offering a range of pleasures and rewards to its loyal, media literate audience. Following this emphasis, I will consider how some of the series' other prominent themes and textual features function as devices which contribute to the series' attempts to produce narrative sophistication, thus making further appeals for audience participation and cultural legitimation.

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[47] See for example, Brunsdon's (1990) reference to Feuer *et al.* (1984) and Boyd-Bowman (1985).
[48] See Boyd-Bowman 1985; Brunsdon 1990; Hilmes 1990; Williams 1994; Jancovich & Lyons 2003.
[49] See Jenkins 1995; Hills 2002 and 2004a; and Lancaster 2001.
[50] See for example, Mittell's (2006: 29) reference to Kristin Thompson's (2003) suggestion that 'programs like *Twin Peaks* and *The Singing Detective* might be usefully thought of as "art television," importing norms from art cinema onto the small screen'. See Thompson, K. (2003) *Storytelling in Film and Television*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

2.1 A CRISIS IN US TELEVISION

The features commonly recognised as fulfilling the aesthetic criteria for contemporary US quality television drama series have often been attributed to the innovative trends that were first adopted during the early part of the second era of television when the networks experienced a crisis in declining audience numbers. Rogers *et al.* (2002) have appropriated the term 'TV II', the time period identified as falling roughly between 1975-1995, as a means of working through the implications of the technological and economic transformations in the television industry and the American economy during the post-Fordist moment of overconsumptionism and excess (see also Reeves *et al.* 1996; and Epstein *et al.* 2006).[51] John Ellis (2002: 61-62, see also Chapter 11) has also characterised the years from the 1980s to the end of the twentieth century as the era of availability, the time in which branding emerges as an increasingly important concept from the view of both the television industry and the consumer.

The television industry's turn to 'quality' throughout this lengthy phase, has tended to reflect wider cultural practices that have celebrated the postmodern dissolution of boundaries, in which the production of self-reflexive, generic hybrid texts, usually distinguished by their high production values, exemplifies the tension between the domains of high art and low popular culture. It was the independent US television production company MTM's (Mary Tyler Moore) launch of the NBC police crime series drama *Hill Street Blues* in 1981, that has been associated with the early construction of this distinctive sense of dramatic quality and 'authorial style'[52] (Williams 1994: 142), as MTM and co-producer Steve Bochco were the first to experiment with generic hybridity, narrative structure, and cinematic form. Challenging the police genre's focus on the one-dimensional, work centred, male action hero in a closed episodic format, *Hill Street Blues* gave presence to strong female and ethnic characters within a large ensemble cast. Through its creation of multiple storylines and perspectives, which helped establish character backstory and programme history, a complex narrative structure with no promise of closure or final resolution was introduced. Most significantly, rich, diverse character development provided more possibilities for a range of audience identifications and engagements. By moving away from specific gendered, generic address and creatively interweaving soap opera's melodramatic formal strategies and 'thematic preoccupations' (Geraghty 1991: 3) with the conventions of the crime series, MTM and Bochco created a show that responded to the pressures of advertisers, as did its MTM predecessor, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and aspired to address a more fragmented, yet upmarket, urban male and female audience. This embodiment of the post-Fordist era of narrow, niche marketing and brand production, signalled the increasing move away from the need to attract a large, mass audience (whose tastes were

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[51] The authors acknowledge that the terms TVI and TV II were first used by Behrens, S. (1986) 'Technological Convergence: Toward a United State of Media', in *Channels of Communication 1986 Field Guide*: 8-10.

[52] Feuer has argued that MTM's authorship can be compared to the corporate authorship that the Freed Unit of MGM acquired with respect to musicals of the 1940s and 1950s (Boyd-Bowman 1985: 75, citing Feuer 1984: 33).

predisposed to rural 'hayseed' comedies, such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*[53]), towards an emphasis on `quality demographics' as an economic determinant. As Rogers *et al.* (2002: 44) write, 'this new philosophy promoted the development of programming that attracted segments of the population that were most valued by advertisers (most notably, eighteen-to forty-nine-year old urban dwellers)'. Although *Hill Street Blues* was never a high ratings show, advertisers were happy to pay high prices for prime-time slots because they knew the series' themes would address the lifestyle concerns of the younger, educated, and higher-earning audience (Boyd-Bowman 1985: 78).

Susan Boyd-Bowman (1985: 81) makes the important observation that the corpus of MTM's generic hybrids, which foregrounded melodrama as the driving narrative, 'don't have much in common with *Dallas*'. *Dallas* emerged earlier from the US in 1978, in the Post-Fordist era, as a highly successful, long running network prime time serial that combined typical features of the soap opera while addressing male audiences with themes that would invite male character identification. The extensive publicity that circulated around the question 'Who Shot JR?' also contributed to the audience's desire to unfold the mystery of the show's open-ended storylines. However, while media scholars have now, for some time, recognised the significance that soaps play in viewers' everyday lives, especially those of women, and have thus legitimised them within the field of cultural studies,[54] the soap opera genre and prime-time shows such as *Dallas* have been, and still are, highly criticised in the public sphere for their sensationalist nature and tendency towards narrative excess. Although highly popular and certainly, at the time, a frequent topic for office gossip near the water cooler, *Dallas* has been constructed in the public sphere as light, escapist entertainment, characteristic of the vast wasteland of standard fare TV, on a different par from a series such as *Hill Street Blues*, which intended to introduce audiences to thought provoking social themes that related to the contemporary issues of 'real' life. In addition, the value placed on *Hill Street Blues'* early deployment of Hollywood's cinematic devices, and documentary style hand held camerawork, as a means of establishing a sense of authenticity and gritty realist aesthetic (Cooke 2001: 23) would distinguish MTM productions from shows such as *Dallas*, forward Bochco's and other MTM alumni's careers, while also marking its hierarchical presence in television studies discourse (see Brower 1992: 166).[55]

The formal 'radicalism' linked to the authorial style (Cooke 2001: 23) that brought wide critical acclaim to *Hill Street Blues,* has thus been understood as a premise that set the tone for the production of many subsequent US shows from a range of genres including those which

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[53] Williams (1994: 143-144, & 153) cites Kerr's (1984: 63) observation of CBS' s cancellation of six popular series in the 1970-1971 season, which included *Mayberry R.F.D.*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Hee Haw*, *Green Acres*, *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*, and *Family Affair*.

[54] See for example, Brunsdon 1981; Hobson 1982; Modleski 1982; Ang 1985; and Geraghty 1991.

[55] Consider Boyd-Bowman's (1985: 80) observation that Paul Kerr's (1984) commentary on 'the 'Altmanesque' visual…style of [*Hill Street Blues*]' often equates US television's intertextual reference to cinema with definitions of quality. This borrowing of film style is then adapted to 'the codes of [the] televisual' to reflect the series' thematic content of 'messy city life' (Boyd-Bowman 1985: 80).

employed various MTM alumni (Jancovich & Lyons 2003: 1, citing Marc 1989: 210) .[56] Although there has been a tendency in literature on US quality TV to prioritise Bochco's later police series *NYPD Blue*, first broadcast in 1993, and successors such as *St. Elsewhere* or *L.A. Law* as other drama series that 'began to reveal a new style of television' and 'carried the vision of a single creator' (Lancaster 2001: 9), these references tend to over-privilege the notion of the individual auteur as well as the formal qualities of these texts. Considering the historical and cultural significance of the earlier CBS police drama series *Cagney and Lacey*, it is worth briefly revisiting the situation that enabled the show to exist beyond its pilot movie.

From the earlier years of TV II, audiences have played an important role in the grass-roots renewal of their favourite US network programmes that were threatened with cancellation. However, unlike the case of the science fiction *Star Trek* series, where the network producer NBC kept an impersonalised distance from fans, Sue Brower (1992) notes, in the example of *Cagney and Lacey*, a show that featured two strong women struggling for their rights in the male profession of police work, that producer Barney Rosenzweig's close involvement with the targeted quality audience, working women between the ages of eighteen and fifty-four, was encouraged from the beginning of the show's inception. Julie D'Acci (1994:2) has also documented the cultural significance of the popularity of *Cagney and Lacey* during a time in the US when the terms 'woman, women, and femininity' were fought over across various channels of communication. D'Acci's case study of the show's production and reception investigates the process of how these 'struggles of meanings' took shape, resulting in the long-term network run from its first made-for-TV movie in 1981, to its last episode in 1988 (*ibid.*: 5). This process of negotiation and meaning making commenced when the lines of communication with the audience were opened in a *Ms.* magazine article, which presented a behind the scenes theme around the airing of the CBS pilot movie in 1981. In Brower's (1992: 168) words, the story illustrated 'the struggle of Rosenzweig and writers, Barbara Corday and Barbara Avedon, to produce a 'women's buddy movie' in the face of industry sexism'. This piece provided a good, early example of 'network-producer conflict', and soon became 'standard publicity for the show' with an accompanying invitation to viewers and *Ms.* readers to support the idea for a series (*ibid.*). Brower writes:

> Rosenzweig further nurtured his relationship with the audience through various public relations strategies, including a newsletter, mailed to everyone who wrote to the show or its stars. Each issue offered hints of upcoming plotlines and lavished praise on those who continued to support the program through what became somewhat ritualised cancellations in subsequent seasons. (*ibid.*: 170)

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[56] Jancovich and Lyons (2003:1) include, 'sitcoms such as *Taxi* and *Cheers*' . Feuer (1992 : 154) writes, however, that '[t]he evolving sitcom had helped prepare the way for the growth of serial drama; reciprocally, serialization gave a new grammar to the upscale comedies of the eighties'.

The ingredients that facilitated the success of *Cagney and Lacey*, or what made it essential viewing amidst the televisual flow at that time in US TV history, included its textual address to a desired audience, the producer's continued efforts to make that address clear extratextually in public discourse, and the convergence of the producer's strategies with the efforts of fans who assisted in the generation of programme publicity (*ibid.*). This case is significant because it provides early evidence, before later series, such as the frequently cited *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, of how a producer began to embrace fans as serious players in a show's production. What separates this example, however, as Brower notes, is Rosenzweig's value ridden perception of this niche audience, who later, in 1984, comprised the group, 'Viewers for Quality Television'.[57] Rosenzweig's description of these individuals as 'affluent, well-educated people' and 'working women and college students', was positioned in stark contrast to the stereotypically imagined, infantalised, less-intelligent fans who, it was assumed, expressed their passions for a star or celebrity in 'Crayola' written fan letters.[58] Brower (*ibid.*: 170) adds that the rhetoric of such 'fan-industry discourse' that surrounded the show 'furthered the MTM 'quality critique' of network television'.

It was, however, the niche audience's potential to constitute a more committed 'avid fanship' (Rogers *et al.* 2002), that later provided further possibilities during TVII for producers to reconsider the role that fans and cult audiences could play in the development of their favourite shows during a time when archiving technologies were becoming more sophisticated and Internet use was on the increase. For this reason, cult series such as *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files* have been heralded as introducing a transformative moment in TVII's television history. Henry Jenkins (1995) , for example, focuses on *Twin Peaks'* textual qualities and observes that the series' complex combination of the serialised soap opera with elements of the detective, mystery genre, facilitated a unique, intense audience participation in which viewers strove to discover hidden meanings in order to break the narrative code and solve the mystery of who killed Laura Palmer.[59] This process of meaning making was enhanced by fans' use of videotape technology.

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[57] There appears to be some ambiguity over the details of the founder of this organisation. Brower (1992: 170) writes that the original founder was Donna Deen, and not Dorothy Swanson who first contacted Rosenzweig's and later 'combined forces' with Deen. This contrasts Harris's (1998: 46) assertion, as a participant in the group for five years, that Dorothy Swanson was founder. Henry Jenkins (2006b) has also recently commented on the group and attributed to Swanson the role of spokesperson and founder. Brower (1992: 171) adds that 'the group continues to be led by Swanson, now in paid position as director of VQT and editor of the newsletter', however, the group has since the time of that writing, according to 'IMDb' 'dissolved in late 2000 due to financial problems'. See http://www.imdb.com/Series/Awards/Viewers_for_Quality_Television_Awards/. Accessed on November 11, 2006.

[58] See Turner, R. (1983) 'The Curious Case of the Lady Cop and the Shots that Blew Them Away'. *TV Guide*, October 8, cited in Brower 1992: 170.

[59] See also Robin Nelson's (1997: 237) discussion about *Twin Peaks'* 'postmodern' potential to offer audiences a range of playful pleasures. These pleasures emerge from the 'interrogative' (*ibid.*: 238) and critical potential of the text which refuses 'ultimately to centre itself' (*ibid.*:237). Through this decentring, facilitated by postmodern bricolage (such as genre mixing), the text disrupts viewers' pleasures with traditional realist claims, which attempt to naturalise discourse/s, and hence 'in theory decentre(s) the subjectivity of viewers' (*ibid.*). The transgressive possibilities of the text thus lie in its capacity to liberate

The ability to tape the entire series not only allowed viewers to escape the restrictions of the broadcast schedule, but frequent rewatching became a necessity in order to decode the show's narrative complexity. This process of interaction was further fostered in the World Wide Web and Internet discussion forums, which extended the range of fans' symbolic imaginative resources and knowledge sharing tools. Catherine Johnson (2005: 100, citing Reeves *et al.* 1996) also explores the significant historical moment within which *The X-Files* emerged, and observes that the series' appeal to the 'quality' audience as well as the fan market, differentiated the show from earlier cult TV in two ways:

> First, unlike earlier series that had been produced for the niche fan audience, this was a series produced by a new network attempting to compete with NBC, ABC and CBS. Second, rather than being a network series produced for a consensus audience that was 'found' by fan audiences and subsequently gained the status of a cult, *The X-Files* was actively produced by Fox as a cult series designed to attract the fan-consumer taste market.

Quality/cult series such as *The X-Files* have thus continued to inspire the production of increasingly complex, serialised television narratives as a strategy to entice audiences so that their viewing is less casual and more loyal from the beginning of a series to its end, and in some cases, beyond a series' original broadcast life. The fact that many fan-created websites for television shows also participate in increasing the television industry's revenue by encouraging the consumption of a range of ancillary products in order to supplement a fan community's symbolic exchanges, supports scholarly accounts that argue against the construction of television fan practices as entirely oppositional and resistant to the intentions of commercial culture.[60]

Paul Levinson (2002) and Rogers *et al.* (2002) have suggested that the process of loyal viewing, participation, and interaction, is enhanced by the commercial free programming that is offered by premium cable systems such as HBO. Rogers *et al.* (2002: 43 & 47) write that the absence of the advertiser is a feature that typifies the third era of digital television history, a period from about 1995 to the present which the authors stress, marks 'a shift in the economic organization of the television industry'. Freedom from the restrictions of anxious American advertisers, leading to more creative, controversial risk taking in original programming, often in the form of the 'made for TV' movie or documentary, has, however, been the major selling point for HBO, *The Sopranos'* cable production company, since 1972. As Rogers et al. (*ibid.*: 46) assert, it is HBO's early 'pioneering' introduction of 'first-order commodity relations to the commercial television landscape', a direct form of symbolic object exchange that does not

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viewers from essentialist assumptions about the fixed nature of individual identity. In short, *Twin Peaks'* capacity to generate intensive self-reflexive critique about the construction of meaning is what makes it challenging viewing and highly desirable for niche audiences. As Nelson puts it, 'That it is not 'easy watching', however, contributes to its cult status, the downside of which is that a large number of viewers find the serial difficult to follow and switch off' (*ibid.*: 239).

[60] See for example, Hills 2002; Jones 2002; and Jones 2003.

involve 'third parties' (such as mass marketers during TVI's Fordist era, and niche advertisers during TVII's post-Fordist era), which will become more prominent in the digital era of TVIII.

If, as Jim Collins (1992: 342) has asserted, *Twin Peaks* emerged in 1990 on prime time network television as a successful response to the three main networks' audience decline in 1989, when prime time viewing numbers dropped to 67%,[61] then the arrival of *The Sopranos* in 1999 has served a useful purpose during TVIII. *The Sopranos*, Rogers *et al.* (2002: 31) assert, has been at the 'epicenter' of this economic shift. The series is seen as an ideal example of programming which is likely to attract upscale, American monthly subscribers, who are likely to claim that they usually 'avoid television' (Mittell 2006: 31), while significantly building the premium cable company's brand identity which, considering its homage to the cinematic tradition, promises viewers something other than just 'TV' (Rogers *et al.* 2002: 47). The development of a strong brand identity has been crucial during TV III as pay channels must not only differentiate themselves from the networks, but also strive for distinction amongst the wealth of advertiser supported services in less expensive cable channels and other 'pay TV' competitors (*ibid.*). Journalistic reviews about *The Sopranos* have been keen to highlight this aspect of the show's relationship to its producer. Grace Bradberry (2002) of *The Observer*, for example, wrote a piece about the allure of HBO's productions. Its title 'Swearing Sex and Brilliance' asserted that *The Sopranos*, HBO's biggest hit, in her words, was what made HBO 'tick' (*ibid*: 8). 'The cult of HBO began', she writes, 'with *The Larry Sanders Show* and became a phenomenon in 1999 with the debut of *The Sopranos*'. Her citation of another critic's view on the series emphasises her point: '*New York Times* critic Stephen Holden declared: 'It just may be the greatest work of American popular culture of the last quarter century' ' (*ibid.*). Rogers *et al.* (2002: 48-49) suggest that the plethora of positive press attention paid to the show in its earlier seasons, in addition to the five Emmy and two Peabody Awards won in its first two seasons, all contribute to the enormous value that the show has added to HBO's brand equity. *The Sopranos'* more recent ability to attract the attention of important public figures such as Hillary Clinton and Al Gore, along with its post Season Six, 15 Emmy nominations, no doubt, continue to enhance HBO's status in the industry.

Epstein *et al.* (2006: 16, citing Carter 2002) also note in a later account of *The Sopranos'* successful partnership with HBO, that the premiere of the series' fourth season attracted '13.4 million viewers, making it not only the most-watched program in HBO history, but the third-most-watched show on cable since'. Such landmark high ratings, not normally used in assessments about quality television, translated into a growth of the cable company's subscriber base from its 1999 figure of 24 million, to 28 million in 2005 (Epstein *et al.* 2006: 16, citing Atkinson 2005: 3). The growth of subscriptions, however, has slowed down since this time, and could be a result of the increasing number of premium digital channels available to HBO

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[61] Collins cites *Entertainment Weekly*, March 4,1990.

subscribers. As Epstein *et al.* (2006: 16-17) add, HBO's bundling of 'six HBO-branded channels to its subscribers, in addition to participating in on-demand services that allow subscribers with digital service to time-shift many HBO programs' may actually cause a dilution of the HBO audience and, in turn, the dilution of its brand with new subscribers. *The Sopranos* has thus been at its most effective when providing an attraction to HBO's elite subscribers to view other HBO original productions that have immediately followed it in its popular Sunday night line-up schedule, or those which have replaced its slot during the series' hiatus, as in the case of *Sex and the City*. While *Sex and The City* also attracted good ratings, the case of the newer 'western' series *Deadwood*, which showed early ratings promise when it followed *The Sopranos'* Sunday night lead-in, is reported to have 'lost a third of its audience' in its second season when *The Sopranos* was in hiatus (Epstein *et al.* 2006: 18, citing de Moraes 2005). The failure of *Deadwood* and *Carnivale* to deliver high ratings have thus resulted in a tainting of HBO's most recent prestigious branded image which *The Sopranos* has been responsible for fostering.

The scope of this chapter does not allow me to trace in detail, as Epstein *et al.* (2006: 18) have done, the many implications of *The Sopranos'* production and distribution during this current economic shift in TVIII, which is characterised by an increasing fragmentation of the televisual landscape. It is important to note, however, that this historical moment has resulted in a type of brand building that is no longer dependent on subscriber numbers but is related to 'developing highly-rated content and attaching the HBO brand to that content' (Epstein *et al.* 2006: 19, citing Brownfield 2001: 8). As the series arrived at its end in June 2007 with the US broadcast of Season Six's continuing nine 'bonus' episodes, HBO has needed to expand its brand building strategies. The imperative to increase profits has thus moved from HBO's reliance on subscriptions to a turn to alternative sources of distribution such as syndication to the A&E basic cable channel (which relies on sponsorship and will demand an edited version of the show), DVD sales, airplanes, hotels, and of course, wider international distribution (Epstein *et al.* 2006: 20). The UK's purchase of *The Sopranos* for Channel Four (first broadcast on pay TV E4, then on free Channel Four and later on the freely available E4) continues to support HBO's branded 'quality' identity while contributing to its own branding initiatives, which are highly invested in the 'exclusivity' which is associated with US quality imports.[62] However, it is likely that the unreliable scheduling of the series in the UK since Season One may have alienated its potential UK audience.

Having spent time setting out the territory which has established the terms of the legacy of US 'quality' television, and the prominent place that HBO and *The Sopranos* occupy as an extension of this legacy, in the following section I want to consider how the series recognises its potential for distinction through its use of David Chase as TV auteur.

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[62] See for example, Rixon 2003.

2.2 DAVID CHASE AS AUTEUR

It is certainly not anything new to suggest that HBO's careful collaboration with the show's creator, David Chase, enhances the branded identity that the cable company has historically created for itself (cf. Lavery & Thompson 2002; Rogers *et al.* 2002). Wide public knowledge that Chase's idea for *The Sopranos* was rejected by Fox and other networks, in addition to his assertion that the series was created in the name of art as a reaction to his disdain for broadcast TV, within which he experienced a long history as a script writer, support 'the ideology of quality' (Hills 2002: 133) which HBO works hard to maintain.[63] Not unlike the popular discourse that surrounded the launch of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks,* which valorised the series in terms of a 'romantic-modernist glorification of originality' (Collins 1992: 344), press reviews of *The Sopranos* as well as various academic critiques (see, in particular, Lavery & Thompson 2002), have tended to linger on Chase's background as a film student and have viewed his 'gangster in therapy' script as an example of innovation which has emerged as 'the most accomplished drama in television history' (Anthony 2002: 9). Others have echoed this rhetoric, using hyperbolic terms such as 'modern masterpiece' to describe the series. *The New York Times* writes *The Sopranos* is 'the best television drama ever made…richly textured comic realism of a complexity and truthfulness that had never before been seen on television' (both accounts cited in Rucker 2000: inside front cover).[64] Academic Ellen Willis has also declared that *The Sopranos* is 'the richest and most compelling piece of television – no, of popular culture – that I've encountered in the past twenty years' (2002: 2). The lengthy story surrounding Chase has thus become one that has explored the trajectory of this previously 'obscure writer' and unrecognised talent, who has finally emerged to tell the public about the 'difficulty of finding a good home for a thoughtful drama on network TV' (Dougherty 1999). Content from various interviews with Chase provide evidence of how his own anti-mainstream discourse contributes further to the series' cultural status as 'quality' and/ or alternative 'cult' TV. In spite of *Hill Street Blues'* and *NYPD Blue*'s earlier innovation, Chase has been quoted as offering sceptical critiques of these network shows, asserting that their tendency to avoid 'dark' or 'psychologically intricate' (Oxfeld 2002) issues, is suggestive of the industry's attempt to maintain a certain degree of hegemonic power over the duped masses, even in the context of 'quality' TV, which has historically asserted its political progressiveness.

As Lavery and Thompson (2002: 20) highlight, Chase has also argued in the early Allen Rucker (2000) interview that *Northern Exposure*, a CBS series for which he wrote and occupied the role of executive producer in its final two years, was merely 'propaganda for the corporate state...it was ramming home every week the message that 'life is nothing but great.' 'Americans

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[63] See for example, the Rucker (2000) interview (also cited in Creeber 2002, and Lavery & Thompson 2002).

[64] It is significant to note that the Rucker (2000) text, which includes the interview I refer to below, was created by HBO specifically for *The Sopranos'* fan community. Hence the 'ideology of quality' (Hills 2002: 133) is constructed through its explicit address to a fan readership.

are great' and 'heartfelt emotion and sharing conquers everything.' ' (Lavery & Thompson 2002: 20, citing Rucker 2000).[65] Chase has also been quoted as stating that *Northern Exposure* 'was somewhat self-conscious and self-congratulatory and precious. But Universal came to me and they offered me a lot of money, more than I'd ever made, and I said okay' (Oxfeld 2002). It was the network's apparent economically driven and conservative incentives, however, that ultimately forced Chase to re-define himself and his *Sopranos* project through an anti-capitalist lens. In a later US National Public Radio[66] interview, Chase re-affirmed his investments with this ideological position, asserting that the first priority of broadcast TV 'is to push a lifestyle. I think there's something they're trying to sell all the time.' Some of this 'selling', he admits, is implicated through scheduling and the use of commercial advertising. He emphasises, however, that the primary aim of commercial TV is to

> sell the idea that everything's okay, that this is a great nation and a wonderful society, and everything's okay and it's okay to buy stuff. .... There's some indefinable image of America that they're constantly trying to push as opposed to actually being entertaining. (Gross 2004; also cited in Lavery 2006: 5).

Quality TV's 'liberal ideological' (Boyd-Bowman 1985: 83) intentions, for Chase, therefore appear to have resulted in shows that have treaded far too safely into the contradictory discourses of contemporary American society which he believes he more actively explores and criticises, within a complex narrative that enables culturally literate viewers to ask further questions rather than be given simple answers. If, as Betsy Williams (1994: 148) reports, *Northern Exposure* was conceived as a 'kinder, gentler *Twin Peaks*', which, through its 'negotiation of a variety of issues pertaining to our foundation myths', appealed to audience groups who may have been marginalised by other network shows, then *The Sopranos* can be seen as a concept that intended to counter this approach with a force that would invite criticism through its attention to the 'darker' side of American culture. It does this by introducing the controversial violent features of the gangster theme to television's family drama. By implication, this focus extends an invitation to audience groups who have attachments to the gangster genre and find its subject matter highly pleasurable. In contrast to *Northern Exposure*'s tendency to tone down culture clashes (*ibid.*:149), a feature to which Chase would object, the gangster theme functions to accentuate these tensions. In this respect *The Sopranos* would appear to make a conscious return to what Thomas Schatz has referred to as the ' "war zone" –

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[65] This opinion certainly is at odds with Williams' (1994: 148) account of the series which emphasises its appeal to diverse audiences (the gay community and Native American Indians) who would otherwise be marginalised by other network shows. Williams adds that 'the show's generic recombination and its penchant for self-reflexivity enable it to engage in a range of issues almost unprecedented on primetime'.
[66] National Public Radio (NPR), and National Public Television in the US are not commercial enterprises supported by advertisers, but are independent, relying on donations, which are heavily solicited in yearly campaigns.

nuclear families, and so forth – that characterizes the narrative universes of most television series' (Williams 1994: 149, quoting Schatz 1987). However, by generically combining gangster conventions with those of the primetime melodrama, in unexpected ways with narrative sophistication, the show sharply increases the stakes of this zone, and in doing so, increases its appeals for quality.

Twin Peaks also returns as an important reference point for Chase in public discourse. In one interview Chase was quoted as saying that he began to think of his idea for *The Sopranos* 'as *Twin Peaks* in the Jersey Meadowlands' (Heath 2001: 32). However, in order to maintain *The Sopranos'* status as a completely original product, different and better than its predecessors, the series had to diminish its connections to the series' soap opera elements which eventually encouraged the discursive construction of *Twin Peaks* as 'being just TV' (Collins 1992: 345). As Lavery and Thompson (2002: 23) highlight, 'Though HBO wanted to enhance the serialized elements, Chase, the aspiring filmmaker, remained determined to make "a little movie every week" and sought to play them down' (Lavery & Thompson, 2002: 23). This decision resulted in a series that consciously combines the serial with episodic elements, thus forming 'a "sequential" series', which 'also has many aspects of an "episodic serial" '(Rogers *et al.* 2002: 54, citing Dolan 1994: 33-35). This move reflects much of recent quality television's new mode of storytelling, which Jason Mittell characterises as 'narrative complexity':

> At its most basic level, narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres. Additionally, narrative complexity moves serial form outside of the generic assumptions tied to soap operas – many (although certainly not all) complex programs tell stories serially while rejecting or downplaying the melodramatic style and primary focus on relationships over plots of soap operas, which also distances contemporary programs from the cultural connotations of the denigrated soap genre.
>
> (Mittell 2006: 32)

By extension, Chase's public contributions to the extradiegetic narratives surrounding his own historical proximity to a New Jersey, Italian-American community, and the strained relationship with his mother,[67] act as additional signposts for interpretative communities' discursive production of quality. In this respect, these narratives support notions of the genius auteur who has special knowledge and therefore arrives with a unique vision, and are aligned with some of the moral and realist criteria that have often been used in critiques of quality TV (Brower 1992:

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[67] One reporter, for example, documents Chase's early childhood memory of his fearful, self-pitying mother who also, like Tony's mother, Livia, threatened to 'poke out his eye with a fork' when seven year old Chase 'kept going on about wanting a Hammond organ' (~~Heath 2001~~: 32).

172; also cited in Thomas 2002: 37).[68] In Brower's account of the group 'Viewers for Quality Television', for example, she notes that members were less concerned

> with specific content or subject matter, such as violence or images of minorities, but rather with linking a taken-for-granted set of 'enlightened' middle-class, liberal, feminist values with a repeatedly examined sense of aesthetic concerns – writing, acting, 'realism,' and authorship.
>
> (1992: 172).

Members hence discussed their favourite programmes in terms that equated them with high, and by implication, authored 'art' rather than the 'mass culture ideology' to which they attributed other examples of television. The combination of Chase's ideologically situated discourse with the series' textual strategies, therefore, it can be argued, tends to intensify oppositions between modernist high art forms as more aspiring examples of moral truth telling, and television's anaesthetised, unauthored, mass-produced, low culture. In the following section, I will explore how the series' referentiality and foregrounding of intertextuality accentuate this binary.

2.3 REFERENTIALITY, INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE GANGSTER GENRE

As I have already suggested, the cinematic gangster genre performs a significant function in helping to establish the series as an exemplar of quality TV. The family and community setting of suburban Clifton and North Caldwell, New Jersey, the casting of many New York born, Italian-American actors,[69] set against the context of Mafia history and the gangster genre, provide the level of realism and authenticity that audiences expect, and frequently draw upon in their critiques about quality drama. As Glen Creeber (2002: 125) observes, however, the series' aggressive incorporation of intertextuality and the 'constant self-reflexive referencing to its own generic history', also indicated by its casting of actors featured in previous gangster films, challenges this sense of realism and in doing so creates a complex television narrative that seeks to investigate the genre.

In this respect, Creeber (*ibid.*: 126) adds, the central character, Tony Soprano, who frequently expresses his nostalgic longings for a time in history that was more stable and secure, 'is clearly meant to represent an earlier generic tradition, a world that still remembers the "rules" and the "standards" that once "served the old Dons so well" '. This writing of Tony as the embodiment of the older, more classic gangster genre, 'inherently at home on the big screen' and uncomfortable with 'the smaller dimensions of television', the home of 'soap operas' and 'confessional talk shows', is set in direct opposition to his younger nephew, Christopher Moltisanti, who Creeber argues represents 'a new breed of both gangster and genre' (*ibid.*: 127).

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[68] See also Brunsdon (1990) for her critique of discourses of quality television in the context of television in the UK.
[69] See for example, Strate 2002: 180.

Tony's difficult encounter with the therapeutic process of self-discovery is thus perceived as a storyline that runs parallel to

> the narrative's own struggle with the personal requirements of television. Frustrated by the constant need to express his feelings, this Mafia boss is not simply resisting the contemporary preoccupation with self-analysis but also struggling to adapt to television's obsession with the private and personal dynamics of human experience. (*ibid.*)

The Sopranos' highly self-reflexive, critical questioning of its televisual relationship to the gangster genre, hence can be understood as playing a major role towards its claims to the quality tradition, as much of its success relies on the knowledges of the adult audience who are familiar with this lengthy cinematic history and are rewarded with the pleasures of genre recognition. The aesthetic echoing of the 'classical' gangster film, for example, in the series' mise en scène and narrative techniques (*ibid.*: 130) is highly pleasurable for the experienced viewer who understands how meanings may be inferred from these quotations. More overt ironic and satirical intertextual citations provide further post-modern referential enjoyment for viewers who 'get the joke' (Pattie 2002: 137) that the writers are clearly attempting to communicate. A good illustration of this type of moment is a scene in Season One in which Christopher shoots the foot of a bakery attendant. This makes an obvious reference to the later gangster film *Goodfellas*, in which the actor who plays Christopher, Michael Imperioli, also performed the role of the victim of a gangster 'foot' shooting. To return to Creeber's emphasis, this scene would also work to confirm, for viewers, Christopher's oppositional relationship to Tony and his positioning in the series as representing the new kind of gangster film, which replaces the 'classical sense of realism with "cartoon style" violence' (Creeber 2002: 129).

An exchange in Season Two between Uncle Junior and a federal marshal with the surname 'McLuhan', also provides the situation for a more brief textual reference to the media scholar Marshall McLuhan. A nurse in the room makes the joke explicit when she responds, 'Your name is McLuhan? That makes you Marshal McLuhan?' This enables another type of referential dialogue to take place between writer and viewer, yet one which takes the form of an 'inside joke' that perhaps only a privileged percentage of the audience may appreciate. Such an example of referentiality can certainly be understood as an illustration of 'the *hyperconsciousness* of postmodern popular culture: a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural status, function, and history, as well as the conditions of its circulation and reception' (Collins 1992: 335). The specific reference to McLuhan provides another highly conscious, self-reflexive tool which contextualises the wider implications of the series' positioning within a global media saturated culture, and is suggestive of the ensemble cast's relationship to media forms which inform the construction of their identities. Amongst the show's illustrations of this phenomenon are these few examples: Tony and his crew's frequent

watching and quoting from *The Godfather* films; Tony's intense relationship with his mother which is foregrounded when he watches scenes from the film *Public Enemy*; Tony's leadership decisions which are influenced by his regular viewing of The History Channel; Adriana's decision to marry Christopher to avoid testifying against him, which is inspired after she watches a courtroom episode of *Murder One*; Tony's motivation to make a pass at his therapist which occurs after watching some of the film *The Prince of Tides*; Uncle Junior's proud declaration that he too has 'HBO'. However, one could also argue that the McLuhan reference offers no support to the progression of the narrative or character construction other than to wink an eye at the educated viewer who understands the significance of Marshall McLuhan's scholarly work. This is not therefore, an example of referentiality that is immediately accessible to all 'culturally' literate viewers who are aware of the 'already said' (Collins 1992: 333, citing Eco 1984) in popular culture or television history. This tendency towards self-referentiality might then confirm Chase's commitment to treating the audience as a more sophisticated formation than previously assumed by the TV industry, yet some audience pleasures may present as more 'exclusive' than others, as they will largely depend on an individual's educational capital rather than their general media literacy.[70]

One could argue that the series therefore consistently makes a range of appeals for legitimacy and cultural value to its diverse interpretative community who, in spite of their privileged spending power and assumed media literacy, are still differentiated by their other cultural locations and taste preferences. This point may also have some resonance for the effect of contemporary quality television's penchant for literary references. French literature, for example, influences part of Season Five's focus on Tony's wife, Carmela, and her affair with son Anthony Junior's high school English teacher. The lunch scene in Episode 4, 'All Happy Families' between Carmela and the more educated Bob Wegler, provides an introduction, for the less educated but culturally aspiring Carmela (and perhaps the less knowledgeable viewer), to the literary work of the 19th Century French novelist, Gustave Flaubert, when Wegler

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[70] For example, this reference was highlighted, amongst others, by David Lavery during his Keynote Address at the US Quality Television Conference (Trinity College, Dublin; April 1-3, 2004). Lavery also previously included it in the long list of 'Intertextual Moments and Allusions in The Sopranos' which he provides in an Appendix to *This Thing of Ours: Investigating* The Sopranos (2002). As a preface to the list, Lavery quotes Tanya Krzywinska's observations about the centrality of intertextuality in shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which reads, 'jokes, as well as direct or indirect references to other shows [or novels] are part of a common cultural vocabulary that connects characters to a broader 'real' world culture. Such references lend the series a greater sense of meaningfulness, timeliness, and textual richness, further encouraging discussion between viewers and helping to interlace the [show's universe] with everyday life' (Lavery 2002: 235, citing Krzywinska 2002: 190). While I do not entirely dispute this assertion, I would argue that the 'common cultural vocabulary' and 'sense of meaningfulness' suggested by some references cannot be over generalised, or, they cannot provide the same frames of reference for all viewers, as Lavery and Krzywinska have suggested. Knowledge of media theorist Marshall McLuhan and discussion about the meaning of McLuhan's work in relation to the *The Sopranos'* fictional universe, for example, was certainly not evidenced within any of *The Sopranos'* online communities in which I participated. The value given to such references, for example at television studies conferences, suggests that while scholar-fans might find great pleasures in such moments, they are also exhibiting their own continuing symbolic struggle to legitimate the domain of 'quality' television in the academic setting, without explicitly acknowledging this tendency.

suggests that Carmela read Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which centres on a bourgeois married woman who has an affair and eventually ends her own life. The reference alludes to the affair Carmela eventually has with Wegler, which becomes more explicit by Episode 6, 'Sentimental Education', a title which also draws directly on Flaubert's other romance themed novel, *A Sentimental Education*. This episode also includes further literary references to Peter Abelard's *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* when Carmela notices the book at Wegler's place after they have made love. There are various levels within which these references can function. In one respect, brief dialogue about the novel's subject matter helps to further develop the audience's understanding of Carmela's character motivations by situating her previous multiple preoccupations with romance fictions. The fulfilment of Carmela's romance desires (which are alluded to in earlier seasons where she is seen reading the popular romance novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*), for example, first appears as a real possibility when she proposes to make lunch for her decorator, Vic, in Season One, who shows an interest but later declines when he discovers who her husband is. Later in Season Four, Carmela and the charming Furio, a newer member of Tony's crew from Naples, develop a strong but unspoken attraction for each other. After Furio leaves for Naples to attend his father's funeral, he battles with the pain of his unrequited passion for the boss's wife, wondering whether he should indeed return to his new life in New Jersey. Although he decides to resume his duties to Tony and attempts to put aside his love for Carmela, the situation becomes so unbearable that Furio finds an excuse to leave the community without saying goodbye to Carmela. Carmela's dramatic break with Tony at the end of Season Four, which is prompted by her discovery that he has been having another affair, is punctuated by Carmela's angry confession of her unfulfilled love for Furio, thus ensuring Furio can never return.

For the loyal fan who has followed the series from its first season, and the more informed viewer who has read these literary works, their pleasures are heightened as the meanings potentially inflect future narrative possibilities or speculations about Carmela's romance with Wegler. In this instance, the issue of elitist knowledge and difference in education capital is stressed in the narrative representation of the two characters and their competing habituses, a point emphasised when Carmela awkwardly attempts to jot down the spelling of Flaubert in her notebook in the earlier lunch scene, and later when she confesses that the book was 'way over my head', followed by her question, 'Why would you be interested in someone like me?' Finally, by utilising 19th Century French literature within the context of a storyline which prioritises a female character's desire for romance and freedom from the constraints of her dominating Mob husband, this move might be understood as another strategy which attempts to bestow 'high art' cultural legitimacy to an extremely melodramatic moment in this generically re-defined, traditionally male centred 'gangster' narrative.

It might not be surprising that this strategy occurred in Season Five, after Season Four received negative criticism from many Internet fans and press reviews in the US, which commented on

the 'boring' and 'dull' turn of the series. As one reporter (Langton 2002: 33) wrote, '[t]he latest Sopranos also seems to have lost the plot. The new series has become bogged down in already well-worn themes such as Tony's endless sessions with his shrink and his long-lost ducks'. Indeed, one can also argue that the adequate naming of the episode 'Sentimental Education' can be understood as a conscious attempt to fix the more complex meaning that occurs across the episode's multiple narrative emphases. Heavily interwoven throughout the romance storyline is the focus on Tony Soprano's cousin 'Tony B', recently returned from a 17-year jail sentence, who strives to go straight, studies hard and passes his massage therapist exam. However, after violently lashing out from experiencing the stress of preparing for hard work in the real business world with a local Korean businessman and his daughter, Tony B returns to his cousin, feeling somewhat defeated, and seeks the security of the familiar, illegitimate 'family' ways. Tony Soprano's responding comment, 'It's hard doing business with strangers,' completes the episode, and would also appear to summarise the implications of Carmela's emotional dilemma which occurs when Wegler ends their relationship after accusing her of using him as a vehicle to inflate AJ's school grades. These apparently opposing and unrelated storylines therefore unite and offer up some of the conditions that constitute the larger thematic dilemma of the series: breaking away from the confines of class and 'family' is difficult, if not impossible, for many who inhabit the space of this fictional community.

The example above can be seen as one small illustration of how the series makes attempts to juggle the delicate balancing act which the new mode of television storytelling demands. The show therefore must consistently balance the pleasures of the serial with episodic norms. In doing so, it must present a central narrative enigma that can be explored over lengthy story arcs while at the same time offering weekly, seemingly isolated episodic events, although some of which may also contribute to character construction and the motivation of potential future events. The successes of this balancing act offer a set of pleasures in which the viewer is invited 'to embrace an "operational aesthetic" in which the pleasure [is] less about "what will happen?" and more concerning "how did he do that?" ' (Mittell 2006, citing Harris 1981). Fans thus watch and question what these characters represent, how this representation helps progress the narrative's contradictions, and 'watch the gears at work' that help to pull the plotlines together (Mittell 2006: 35).

In this respect, like other quality series that ask 'viewers to engage more actively to comprehend the story and [reward] regular viewers who have mastered each program's internal conventions of complex narration', *The Sopranos* makes a plea to audiences to 'trust in the payoff that [they] will eventually arrive at a moment of complex but coherent comprehension' (*ibid.*: 37). As Mittell argues, this is the kind of trust loyal audiences must place in a series which may make use of '[f]antasy sequences' which 'abound without clear demarcation or signals', thus introducing a situation in which the audience might be faced with 'temporary confusion' (*ibid.*), or even, perhaps, a more distinctive sense of displeasure for some. Viewers then must accept

this 'temporary disorientation' as the narrative conditions invite this relationship with the text, knowing that viewers will acquire 'comprehension skills' over the lengthy time of their involvement with the series (*ibid.*). *The Sopranos'* use of dream sequences, in particular, the one that defines Season Five's later episode 'The Test Dream', and the similar, near death fantasy sequence experienced by Tony in the second episode of Season Six, after he is shot by Uncle Junior, explicitly introduces the temporary disorientation Mittell describes. Loyal viewers, however, can engage in the pleasures of decoding meanings about Tony's character which are inferred by the complex operational aesthetic. By employing formal art cinema conventions the narrative blurs the boundaries between Tony's more surreal 'dream' state and his conscious 'awakened' one. Events hence 'oscillate between character subjectivity and diegetic reality, playing with the ambiguous boundary to offer character depth, suspense, and comedic effect' (*ibid.*).

In the following section I will briefly explore how the theme of 'therapy' and the discourse of self-reflexivity are utilised in the series as strategies which invite closer viewer identification with characters while also providing the central focus for the series' central narrative enigma, or 'endlessly deferred narrative' (Hills 2002).

2.4 CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT, THERAPY AND DISCOURSES OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

In spite of the series' frequent intertextuality and self-critical ironic tone, which can be said to undermine the claims of realism, realist modes of representation can also work to emphasise the sensitive development of a character over the long life of the series, another prominent textual indicator of quality drama. The viewer's knowing ironic distance is hence consistently challenged by the text's commitment to establishing well-rounded, believable, ambiguous characters. In the case of Carmela, the loyal viewer witnesses and (at least for some viewers) is sympathetic to her frequent, yet contradictory or unsuccessful, attempts to become a stronger and more active social agent. Carmela's role as a woman embedded in the codes of the gangster genre and hence the confines of a highly traditional, Catholic, Italian-American community, is an identity she performs with considerable uncertainty. Carmela's dissatisfaction is often made explicit through the character's various means of self-reflection, most notably in the context of the Church confessional and with a therapist recommended by Tony's own therapist, Dr. Melfi. In this sense, as McCabe and Akass (2006: 40) argue, the paradoxes that define Carmela are consistently confronted and 'might be symptomatic of a broader dilemma facing women in the post-feminist (media) age'. The representation of such dilemmas (made more poignant as she is contrasted against her increasingly highly capable university student daughter, Meadow), and the possible empathetic identifications with the character, can thus provide much pleasure for audience members who value serious attention to these politics.

If 'greater psychological character development' (Feuer 1992: 150) has been identified as a feature of drama that fosters a viewer's closer emotional identification, it is also significant to add, as Hills (2004a) has argued in his work on the teen series *Dawson's Creek*, that by utilising 'therapeutic' 'self-reflexive' discourse as a central narrative focus, the series further situates itself in relation to the expectations of quality TV. Hills (*ibid.*: 54) asserts that *Dawson's Creek* stresses 'teen agency and articulacy' and in doing so, manages the stigmatisation of the teen by aligning the series 'with cultural systems of value that credit individual agency, self-mastery and self-expression'.[71] Although *The Sopranos* approaches self-reflexive discourse in a very different way from *Dawson's Creek*, the series' overt use of therapy can be understood to work as a similar key strategy which attempts to manage and negotiate the tensions between the text's melodramatic features and its action related gangster emphasis. One of the key ways in which *The Sopranos* attempts to interweave these two textual domains, and to legitimise the sphere of the private where 'feelings' are prioritised, is through its use of Tony's continuing therapeutic and self-reflexive journey.

On one level, the therapy theme functions to reassert Chase's commitment to conveying a sense of potent realism to the central character's struggles to cope with business and the private concerns around family. Family dysfunction and emotional struggle are themes that have also been suggested through the extradiegetic narratives surrounding Chase's relationship with his mother and his own experience of therapy, which have been reported as the primary inspirations for the construction of Tony Soprano's self-reflexive 'project' (cf. Giddens 1991). It is not surprising then, that unlike the more unrealistic depiction of the 'hyper-articulate', frequently self-reflexive teens in *Dawson's Creek*,[72] neither Tony's nor Carmela's relationship with therapy results in a clear sense of 'self-mastery'. While often emotionally moving, Tony's encounters with Dr. Melfi are also frequently comic, ironically punctuated, or end with the feeling that nothing has been achieved. A strong sense of therapeutic identity reconstruction as a lengthy, unpredictable and unfinished 'process' hence permeates the series. Indeed the question pertaining to whether Tony will choose to stay in the Mob 'family' or fully engage in moral reform for the sake of his domestic family becomes a central feature that encourages ongoing audience speculation. The notion of the unattainable, as I have suggested, also tends to characterise the series' narrative arcs. This is often constructed through the characters' continued efforts to strive for some notion of an ideal, whether it be to live up to a harmonious

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[71] Consider, for example, Lavery & Thompson's (2002: 19) own scholarly praise of Chase's creative genius in which the authors refer to an interview to highlight Chase's early devotion to 'Freud'. See Longworth, J.L. (2000) *TV Creators: Conversations with America's Top Producers of Television Drama*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press. The appeal of *The Sopranos'* representation of therapeutic discourse is also reflected in books written by 'medical experts' on the subject, such as Gabbard, G.O. (2002) *The Psychology of The Sopranos: Love, Death, Desire and the Betrayal in America's Favourite Gangster Family*. New York: Basic.; and Yacowar, M. (2002, 2003) *The Sopranos on the Couch*. New York and London: Continuum.

[72] See for example, Davis & Dickinson 2004, and Hills 2004a.

vision of the 'community' (cf. Geraghty 1991: 85) or to exist as an ideal self, independent of the constraints of past traditions.

If the uniting of the private and the public spheres is 'never achieved' (*ibid.*: 65) in Tony Soprano's world, or is consistently challenged by a woman (*ibid.*), one could argue that the series' focus on Tony's examination of self, identity, and the theme of impossibility, contributes to the show's 'endlessly deferred narrative', 'a narrative question that is central to the programme's format and so can never be entirely resolved or displaced without reinventing/destroying the programme concerned' (Hills 2004a: 57; see also Hills 2002: Chapter 6). The role of the woman in the Melfi/Tony therapeutic relationship, one can argue, also offers support for this potential. It is through Tony's doctor/patient relationship with Melfi, characterised by a focus on talk and intimacy, yet strained with rationalising denial as well as attraction and intrigue from both parties, that Tony's narrative actions in the domestic and public spheres are often determined. The Tony and Melfi dynamic, therefore also participates in a ' 'will they, won't they' tease' (Hills 2002: 135), acting as another narrative focal point, which, if resolved, could damage the programme's potential to 'act as a lure' for the audience (*ibid.*).

In addition, the tension of the 'double narrative' (Couldry 2007: 147) that is created through the close paralleling of the series' self-reflexive preoccupation with generic re-invention, with the concentration on Tony's therapeutic self re-invention, often emphasised through the aesthetics of television rather than the cinematic, can thus be seen as an important textual strategy that increases narrative complexity, while rewarding 'knowing' adult audiences with a range of pleasures that extend beyond genre recognition. The discourse of therapy and hence, self-reflexivity, therefore can be seen to function as the anchor from which many other narrative concerns around particular characters and character relationships take place.

On a basic and practical level, Tony's therapy sessions tend to offer a coherent device for establishing an increasingly complex backstory for Tony's character and his relationship to others in the cast ensemble, including Uncle Junior, Tony's mother Livia, Tony's sister Janice, and Tony's cousin 'Tony B', for example. Tony reflects on his past and discovers through therapy, for example, that Livia is a primary source for his internal struggles about living out his days as a Mob Capo. In therapy scenes and flashbacks Tony realises it was his mother who held his father back from attaining his dreams of breaking away from New Jersey Mob life when she threatened she would kill her own children if he dared to leave. The use of flashbacks and dream sequences are often exploited to offer the viewer the opportunity to engage on an emotional level and also a formal one, as these sequences, at times, unfold in narratively complex ways, as I suggested earlier. In addition, Dr. Melfi's complex character story is also often developed through this self-reflexive discourse, either in dream sequences or in the sessions with her own

therapist which provide the opportunity for her to articulate her confusions about her relationship to Tony.

The discourse of therapy offers the series an additional form of explicit representation to what Anthony Giddens (1991) has called later modernity's period of 'extreme reflexivity' (1991: 29). In this respect, the therapeutic narrative invites a further examination of the institutions of modernity that, Giddens (*ibid.*: 2) argues, 'shape' but are also 'shaped by' 'new mechanisms of self-identity'. Giddens asserts that the institutions of modernity, such as the therapeutic doctor/patient relationship, self-help books, and other global media forms, including radio, television and film, therefore participate in the discourses of reflexivity, and are seen to 'undercut traditional habits and customs' (*ibid.*: 1). This more general perceived threat to tradition, as it relates to notions of stable community and gender roles, for example, becomes one of the series' primary thematic concerns, and is explored through a variety of narrative means. I have already pointed to some illustrations of the series' use of intertextuality and referentiality in order to represent how the characters symbolically construct their sense of self and place in the fictional community in relation to media forms. If Christopher represents a new gangster style that threatens to displace the moral concerns of the classical gangster genre, then Carmela's turn to romance fictions and, eventually, a therapist, presents a further potential threat to the expectations of her determined gendered role within the gangster fiction. Carmela's confidence in the church confession and her trust in the local priest, for example, frequently results in the maintenance of her traditional place in the family and community, while her disclosures to an outsider, a Jewish therapist, about Tony's unlawful pursuits results in a more open challenge to these norms which, at the time of the appointment, she denies, yet, by the end of Season Four, revisits when she initiates her lengthy separation from Tony.

Although Carmela positively welcomes Tony's self-reflexive efforts, as she believes it will help strengthen their marriage, close family members of the older generation, Livia and Uncle Junior, act negatively to the extreme point at which they seriously threaten Tony's life. Tony's reliance on therapy eventually prevails, however, perhaps with the same degree of ritual and trust with which he embraces his favourite old films and television shows, even after finally confessing the fact to his crew members. Similarly, in the same way that Tony rehearses media texts in his daily social interactions, he also recites Dr. Melfi's maxims, although frequently with error.

Tony's choice to examine his feelings and the nature of his identity, it becomes clear, is also a practice eventually shared by others in his crew. When Tony discloses his 'therapy' secret, Paulie also admits to having experienced counselling in the past when he 'had issues'. Later, as the series progresses, Christopher's alcohol and drug dependency results in his own self-reflexive project when he undergoes rehabilitation and later regularly attends AA meetings. Much later toward the end of Season Five, further explicit representation of the processes that define the reflexive project of the self occurs in a slowly developing and emotionally moving

storyline surrounding the character Vito Spatafore, a high earning member of Tony's crew. The episode reveals the fact that Vito is a closet homosexual when he is discovered, by Meadow's fiance, Finn, engaging in oral sex with a security guard in a car at the Mob run construction site where Finn is working his summer job. Vito's self-actualisation, or what Giddens (1991: 218) would call the '[r]eflexive appropriation of bodily processes and development' takes shape more intensely, however, in Season Six, when viewers discover he has successfully lost a significant amount of weight with the assistance of a weight loss programme. In a later episode, when two crew members have to collect payment from a bartender at a gay dance club, they witness Vito with another man, both of whom are dressed accordingly for the occasion, leaving the crew members with no doubt about Vito's homosexuality. After Vito flees New Jersey in fear of his life and ends up in the sleepy, but progressive, Northeastern state of New Hampshire, defined by the slogan 'Live Free or Die', also appropriated for the episode title, he discovers a welcoming community of gay men, and begins to see the real possibilities for the mobilisation of a new identity. Here he meets friendly people and a caring male partner who eventually confesses his love. This security, however, is short lived when Vito runs out of money and finds himself returning to New Jersey when he realises he can not adapt to the hard work that is required in his newly obtained construction job.

This extended focus on Vito's bodily development and (albeit, conflicted) life-style choices in Season Six, and not earlier in the series, is significant, as the series slowly constructs Vito's character as a more prominent 'crew member' and introduces early clues to the audience which may indicate his sexuality. Vito's new threat to the community also calls attention to the possible ways in which Tony's character has matured since Season One. In contrast to Tony's earlier impatience with the knowledge that his daughter Meadow was dating a mixed race University student whose mother was black and whose father was Jewish, Tony reflects upon the issue of tolerance during his therapy sessions with Melfi. Although this seriousness is again inflected comically when he refers to the US series *The L Word* (a drama which centres on the lives of a community of lesbians), when attempting to frame his position about Vito, he indicates he may consider accepting Vito back into the crew, as times have changed and Vito is one of the better earners. Vito's conflicted homosexual storyline, and his subsequent violent murder, orchestrated by a member of the New York crew, however, allows the series to return to its endlessly deferred narrative emphasis on issues pertaining to identity and the impossibility of attainment.

2.5 SUMMARY

My above discussion has attempted to map out some of the prominent ways in which *The Sopranos* has emerged out of the US quality tradition. By drawing attention to its quality TV predecessors and the historic, industrial conditions that enabled their textual production, I have made explicit that the term 'quality' is something that is not, by nature, inside the text, but is the

product of a discursive construction. This follows Hills's (2004a: 64) assertion that quality 'is produced discursively and intertextually' and can thus 'be read selectively by audiences in different cultural/social contexts'. Contemporary television's tendency towards increasing 'narrative complexity' has therefore arisen as an innovative storytelling mode (Mittell 2006) which cannot be separated from the economic dimensions that have supported its production. In presenting the extratextual discourse which has surrounded the series' creator David Chase, I have sought to examine how Chase's 'anti-TV', 'anti-mainstream' discourse has functioned as a further marketing strategy for the series and its producer HBO, whose more recently enhanced prestigious branding as 'not TV' has heavily relied on the success of *The Sopranos*. Chase's public discourse about his professional and personal histories hence provide the series with the TV auteur it needs to stand out amongst a wealth of other 'quality' network and cable dramas, while also providing its (cult) fan-audience with 'a point of coherence and continuity' (Hills 2002: 132).

I have presented only a broad outline of some of the series' use of intertextuality and referentiality which support the series' homage to American gangster cinema, while appealing for legitimation to its sophisticated, 'knowing' audience. In order to maintain the level of sophistication the quality label requires, the text must also consistently seek to downplay its connections with seriality and, hence, with the soap opera genre. As the general tone of the series demands attention to how the narrative seeks to maintain this delicate balance, I have tended to draw on a few examples that help explore this. Providing an extension of this critique, I have also focussed on how the series exploits contemporary discourses of self-reflexivity, as a central means through which other themes, for example the series' endlessly deferred narrative concern with the nature of identity, can be explored.

This broad take on the series has therefore meant that a host of other concerns that have arisen out of the series' long, six-season life, have not been addressed in detail. In-depth textual analysis about the series' complex treatment of sexism, racism, ethnicity and homophobia, have been better addressed with varying emphases in the first and second edited volumes by David Lavery (2002 & 2006) and in other collections.[73] My aim, however, has been to open up a space through which further to consider how certain regimes of value have informed the construction of *The Sopranos* as a 'quality' series, and how these regimes may shape meaning making practices or fan performances in the series' online community. Amongst a host of other observations, the analysis in Chapter 6 of the empirical data will explore how the construction of the auteur might be utilised in fandoms. The area of the narrative's 'operational aesthetic', which may involve appropriating art cinema's formal conventions, degrees of genre mixing and thematic shifts, and thus a range of appeals for audience loyalty and trust, may also have the tendency to introduce particular tensions to the dynamics of the fan community. How these

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[73] See for example, Lavery's (2006) recent Introduction, which provides a detailed overview of *Sopranos* related texts.

tensions are negotiated in the groups and thus put to discursive use will also provide some of the focus for the discussion in Chapters 6 and 7. This analysis, however, will be prefaced and supported by the concerns of the next chapter, which illustrates a shift in attention from the ways in which the television industry has attempted to locate its audience, to a critical investigation of how cultural studies scholarship has attempted to understand audience and fan activity.

Chapter 3: Reading audience activity

3.0 INTRODUCTION

My brief overview, in Chapter 2, of US television's turn to quality at the time of a ratings crisis, signalled the significance of the industry's 'search for the audience commodity' (Ang 1991). That is to say, the audience is understood as a product sold from ratings firms to networks and advertisers. Hence their desire to know the audience, understand their needs, and to create innovative programming that would continue to appeal to niche audience markets (see also Meehan 1994) . An analysis of the way in which value is constructed discursively and marketed to audiences was crucial in this discussion. In this chapter I want to pursue an investigation of the role that earlier cultural studies audience research has played in creating its own criteria for value through its search for knowledge about the audience, as was summarised briefly in Chapter 1, with reference to work that fell into the 'Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm'. As Virginia Nightingale (1996: 94) asserts, audience research can be understood as 'a process of translation followed by transposition'. From this perspective, the academic's written account of the audience and its relationship to popular texts can be understood as an interpretation of 'the audience performance as text' (*ibid.*), or, as Janice Radway (1987: 5) observes about her own work, as a 'construction of my informants' construction of what they were up to'. Audience research thus becomes an 'act of textual criticism' (Nightingale 1996: 94) with the broadcast text and the audience-performance-as-text chosen as sites for close academic analysis. It is these 'three linked texts' (broadcast, audience 'and the researcher's version of the audience text' [*ibid.*]) that are constructed in audience research. Nightingale also adds

> ...at least three transpositions occur: the producer/production team transpose documented experience into its broadcast form; the audience transposes the broadcast text into life experiences; and the audience researcher transposes the performance of audience into academic discourse. (*ibid.*: 94-95)

Audience research can thus be understood as a genre of writing, a critical transposition whereby the audience constructed text, i.e., people's 'talk' about what popular culture texts mean to them in relation to their lived experiences, is transposed for a community of scholarly readers. The following discussion will investigate some of the implications this act of translation and transposition has had in earlier audience studies.

3.1 APPLYING THE ENCODING/DECODING MODEL: THE *NATIONWIDE* STUDY

The desire to understand audiences as implicated within complex social processes and not as isolated individuals either manipulated by mass media or using it to satisfy particular needs, resulted in a second phase of audience research, dominated by Stuart Hall's (1980) 'Encoding/decoding' model, which led to a critical emphasis on audience interpretation and discourse. Hall's theory was first tested through empirical investigation with television

audiences by David Morley and was published as *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980). The premise of 'Encoding/decoding', as explored through Morley, sought to identify the audience's 'symbiotic relationship with the text' (Nightingale 1996: 16). The construction of textual meaning, was seen as determined by both the semiotic structure of text as well as the audience's interpretations (*ibid.*). The work thus attempted to complement the structural analysis of the production of popular television programmes with the relational study of 'structures of reception' (*ibid.*: 21). Hall's consideration of the role of semiotics within a Marxist framework of power relations placed an emphasis on the examination of social and ideological processes. In this respect, as Nightingale (1996: 22) asserts, Hall's essay makes a claim that 'semiotics could explain the audience'. In short, messages are understood as 'encoded' through cultural texts by various institutions of power such as the media, using a combination of signs, or signifying practices, that reproduce hegemonic structures and dominant bourgeois ideology. The media thus produce a dominant bourgeois discourse about the world, and the audience engages in a process of reading or 'decoding' the discourse. Through its focus on the discursive positionings of audience groupings, such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc., the model offers a view of three audience-reading strategies: dominant, negotiated and oppositional. These positions are based on the socio-economic locations that consumers occupy, and which influence how they decode television programmes and other cultural texts. Reading and accepting meaning from the dominant position thus confirms an individual's incorporation within the dominant ideology, whereas an oppositional reading introduces alternative meaning and implies resistance to dominant codes. The negotiated reading implies that the viewer broadly accepts the dominant ideology, but relates the meaning to his/her own personal interests and situated contexts. This process of inflection thus may indicate some struggle against dominant encodings. For Hall, making meaning is therefore considered active through these possible responses, however, it 'is nevertheless a fundamentally restricted and limited activity' (Hills 2005b: 64, citing Hall 1994: 262) with 'preferred' meanings not entirely determining responses, but remaining 'ultimately determining forces' (Hills 2005b: 64).

Morley's research grouped respondents according to their occupation, which provided an indicator of their socio-economic positions, and found some consistencies in decoding patterns that coincided with the model's hypothesis. However, there was further diversity within each of the designated groups and similarities across groups which introduced contradictions and suggested a more complex text-audience relationship.[74] Morley's understanding of audience variability, however, was still confined within the boundaries of the model which focused on the distribution of power in relation to the reading positions and hegemony in which processes of struggle and resistance are foregrounded (Morley 1980: 91, cited in Abercrombie & Longhurst

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[74] Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998:17), for example, summarise that the student group showed marked differences, with black further education students adopting a resistant reading strategy and white university arts students adopting the negotiated position.

1998: 17). Morley (1992: 136) later reflected on the study's shortcomings, arguing that there was a tendency 'to think of deep structures (for instance class positions) as generating direct effects of the level of cultural practice'. Any given 'deep structure', however, can '[work] itself out in particular contexts' (*ibid.*). Morley supports his reinstatement of the notion of a person's more active cultural engagement by drawing on Dyer's assertion that

> one cannot conclude from a person's class, race, gender, sexual orientation and so on, how she or he will read a given text (though these factors do indicate what cultural code she or he has access to). It is also a question of how she or he thinks and feels about living in her/his social situation' (Morley 1992: 136, quoting Dyer 1977).

Morley's investment with questions concerning hegemony is again noticed when he later confessed surprise that his earlier work was 'invoked as a theoretical legitimation of various forms of 'active audience theory' ', and his insistence that research should not abandon concerns with 'how to understand the nature of hegemony/subalternity, the interlacing of resistance and submission, opposition and complicity' (Morley 1995: 310, citing Martin-Barbero 1988: 462; see also Morley 1997). The assertion that cultural texts contain ideologically dominant 'preferred' meanings, which are translated via the academic's supposedly neutral reading (Hills 2005b: 64), also remains implicit, and the nature of (contradictory) audience response is ultimately designated into fixed categories at opposite ends of a spectrum.

For Nightingale (1996: 14-15), the encoding/decoding model, and Morley's empirical realisation of it for the study of media audiences, with its acknowledgement of active, diverse audience groups (as opposed to individuals) as belonging to ' 'communities' in the sense of sharing 'direct common concerns', especially socially and politically', was inspired by the concerns of previous class and subcultures research which stressed subcultural resistance to dominant culture.[75] This critical translation of the audience as a dispersed, non-geographically bounded interpretative community, based on questions of struggle and power, shapes many accounts of fandom that followed this work. Examples falling within what has been described as the 'second generation' (see Hills & Jenkins 2001) of fan studies, such as Constance Penley's (1991) *Brownian Motion: women, tactics and technology*, Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992), and Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992), offer valuable reference points. However, it is useful first to situate these significant contributions in relation to earlier studies such as Dorothy Hobson's (1982) observations about the nature of everyday domestic viewing contexts and meaning making for a community of viewers (largely women, but also includes male and female pension aged viewers) of the British soap opera *Crossroads*.

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[75] See for example, Williams, R. (1985) *Culture and Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin; and Hebdige, D. (1979) *Subculture: the meaning of style*. London and New York: Methuen.

3.2 THE VALUE OF THE POPULAR: VALIDATING THE 'VOICE' OF THE AUDIENCE

The value of Morley's extension of the terms of the popular culture debate (Nightingale 1996: 68) was emphasised, although approached quite differently, in Hobson's research which presented observations from interviews with the production personnel of *Crossroads* as well as interviews and unstructured conversations with an audience of largely female viewers with whom she watched the programme in their homes and had established a long-term research relationship. Hobson's work undermined the role of ideology and preferred meaning and stressed the audience community's agency in their ability to create an infinite range of meanings. The generation of meaning was based on their interrupted domestic viewing situation, expectations of the genre and their life experiences which may have coincided with the serial's thematic and social concerns (eg. 'the problems of everyday personal life and personal relationships' which cut across issues of class, as they are experienced by women regardless of class status or age [Hobson 1982: 34]). Hobson writes,

> Different people watch television programmes for different reasons, and make different 'readings' of those programmes, and much of what they say is determined by preconceived ideas and opinions which they bring to a programme. The message is not solely in the 'text' but can be changed or 'worked on' by the audience as they make their own interpretation of a programme. (1982: 106)

Hobson's investigation of the culturally denigrated soap opera genre (*Crossroads* was also often negatively judged by its production team), traditionally addressing the concerns of a female audience, provided useful material, along with other feminist work that emerged around that time,[76] with which critically to respond to previous subcultural research which was dominated by concerns of subcultural activity in the more masculine public sphere. In this respect, Hobson's study fits comfortably amongst the research narratives that sought to validate women's lived experience and account for their marginalised voices. In the chapter in which Hobson presents respondents' transcripts and her reading of their frequently disrupted domestic viewing contexts, Hobson is clear to assert that the women, although sharp in their critical faculties, do not use the same language as academics in their discussions about TV (1982:106). Their more 'commonsense' talk reflects their linguistic competence which is based on their everyday life experiences, and it is this interpretation of the audience that Hobson privileges over the semiotic concerns of encoding/decoding (*ibid.*). Although Hobson (*ibid.*: 107) includes an acknowledgement that the presence of the researcher can alter the research situation, she provides no details about the number of women with whom she met nor does she chart their specific demographic information. Her respect for the authentic, 'commonsense' voice of the female audience community prevails and functions as a justification for her dismissal of the 'theoretical principles' which underpin audience research methods (*ibid.*).

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[76] See for example, McRobbie 1980; Brunsdon 1981; and McRobbie and McCabe 1981.

Such an approach, as Nightingale (1996: 73) notes, in spite of providing a useful alternative 'type of theorisation' not available through applications of encoding/decoding (i.e., revealing the implications of mass broadcasting), also tends to reflect a 'populist project' (*ibid.*: 72) agenda and constructs other problems for the research. Respondents' statements, for example, about the serial's ability to communicate realism, seem to provide cases for firm arguments against the show's critics (Hobson 1982: 120), or illustrate 'the scriptwriter's accurate reflection of the audience's opinion' (*ibid.*: 134). In this respect, Hobson's approach resembles a preoccupation with the 'sender-receiver model' (Nightingale 1996: 71) in which the sender's intentions are either challenged or confirmed by the receiver and are accepted by the researcher as unproblematic truths, or confirmation about the show's authenticity.

This privileging of the audience's voice over any discussion about ideology, or the place of rhetoric in the construction of the producer's mode of storytelling, is most noticeable in Hobson's conclusions about the dispute between viewers and producers over the production company, ATV's, intended dismissal, or 'killing-off', of one of the show's main characters. The audience letter campaign (dominated by pensioners) to save the actress Noele Gordon is conceived as a conflict about 'ownership' and 'rights of possession' of the show between the two opposing parties (Hobson 1982: 153). Apparently, after consideration of the many fan letters, the producers decided to change the fate of character Meg Mortimer and allowed her 'to sail off happily into the sunset' (*ibid.*:172). What was previously interpreted as the audience's lack of power over their choice of programmes (*ibid.*: 139), is later perceived by Hobson as their power to alter the course of production decisions (*ibid.*: 172). What stands out in the lengthy interview transcript between Hobson and ATV producer Jack Barton, is the way in which Barton employs the rhetoric of audience power as a means of explaining ATV's decision. In response to Hobson's question 'Was it easy to say to Charles, 'I'm not going to kill her,' or not?', Barton replies,

> No, I simply went to Charles and I told him that what you have to accept is the personal involvement and how it is going to affect people's lives. You can't just high-handedly say, 'We'll kill her, and it'll be a smashing funeral,' or whatever. You can't. And he accepted that decision. I said, 'But because I'm going really to go for maximum publicity on it, and we'll really go for this, we'll get both bites of the cherry.' And so purely from a professional point of view and getting the press and the whole nation interested in what might happen that's why until the last minute you didn't know whether she'd live or die. I know my audience, and that is what they wanted, and I can't tell you the mail I've had since. It's like as if you're home secretary and you've reprieved someone, and they say we're eternally grateful to you and so on. (Hobson 1982: 173)

It is telling that Hobson chose to ignore Barton's expression of professional interest that the accumulation of 'maximum publicity' from the early days of the debate would help achieve. The reference to getting 'both bites of the cherry', for example, clearly illustrates his discursive construction of the value of the 'active' audience whom he claims he wants to please. Barton's

comments, as well as the story's final outcome, also demonstrate that audience agency was perhaps more limited than Hobson suggested, and ultimately undermined by the producer's financial interests. As Nightingale (1996: 73) argues, the character's move out of the show was, in fact, a good example of the network's assertion of power and final authority and not the audience's (Nightingale sees this as a strength of the research not recognised by Hobson), as the producers maintained their decision to cease the actress's contract.

3.3 THE APPEAL OF THE POPULAR REVOLT NARRATIVE: 'READING' POPULAR CULTURE AND FANDOM

Hobson's 'Afterword' chapter invites an interpretation of the event concerning the fate of 'Meg Mortimer', as one of victory in the viewers' battle to claim ownership of the television text. Janice Radway's *Reading The Romance* (1987 [1984]), a study centred around the 'Smithton' community of women readers of popular romance novels, makes the claim that it was Hobson's emphasis on the power of the viewer to bring meaning to a programme that provided Radway with a theoretical position (although notably extended), from which to frame her work (Radway 1987: 8). Radway's study was invested in the examination of 'how, when and why' 'interpretive communities' are constituted (*ibid.*). Radway explored how a group of middle-class women in the US midwestern community of Smithton, all married with children, made meaning from the experience of their repeated heavy consumption of popular romance novels. While also examining the interactive relationship between the publishing industry and the highly respected bookshop attendant Dorothy Evans,[77] who mediated between the industry and readers and advised the women on which books were best to pursue, one of the key emphases in Radway's work is on how

> meaning of the romance reading experience may be closely tied to the way the act of reading fits within the middle-class mother's day and the way the story itself addresses anxieties, fears, and psychological needs resulting from her social and familial position. (Radway 1987: 45)

Women's pleasures in reading the romance were generally articulated as a form of release or escape, as a means of transporting them (symbolically as well as temporally, and even physically as they retreated to a private space) from the restrictions of their daily domestic duties and routines (Radway 1987: 88). The readers thus made a resistant claim for their own autonomous space as they removed themselves from the demands of their children and husbands. While the content of the romance text was also significant in the readers' determination of meaning, as they separated books into categories of 'good' and 'bad' (Radway 1987: 120), with readers placing high value on the 'ideal romance', which features intelligent heroines with 'fiery disposition[s]' (*ibid.*: 123), it is perhaps the subversive pleasures the women

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[77] Evans developed a respectable reputation by readers which led to her writing a review newsletter that circulated amongst other bookshops and editors. She then became well known to the publishing industry who began to turn to her for advice on how to best address the audience's needs (Radway 1987: 47).

found in '*the act of romance reading*' (*ibid.*: 86, emphasis in original), rather than in 'the meaning of the romance' which has implications for an understanding of how forms of 'empowerment in fandom', such as those related to gender, may be located 'in the micro field of media consumption, the private and the domestic sphere' (Sandvoss 2005: 15). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 26) also add that the reading process allowed the women to become involved within a wider community of other romance readers. Radway (1987: 96) makes it explicit that this community was not in any way operating 'on an immediate local level'. Indeed, it was Radway's research that facilitated a closer collective sharing of the women's common reading experiences. The pleasures of engaging in the social experience of sharing one's close investments in a particular TV text with a community of others, however, as other fan studies have shown and my case study will explore, can be viewed as an activity, or 'process' which becomes just as important as the fan's sense of textual ownership.

With its emphasis on gender politics and the female audience's culture as subordinate, John Fiske (1987: 72, cited in Nightingale 1996: 76) also applauds Hobson's study, leading him to argue the research demonstrated 'a sort of covert revolt by housewives against patriarchy'. Fiske's (1989) theory of popular culture and fandom, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 23) observe, offers an extreme version of the 'Dominant Audience' viewpoint within the Incorporation/Resistance paradigm, exploiting encoding/decoding's claim for audience activity and providing a point of departure for subsequent work on fan cultures. Considering its impact on fan studies, the premise underlying Fiske's approach demands some attention.

For Fiske (1992a: 297), negotiated readings may be produced by individuals who are 'almost' incorporated within the dominant ideology of the text, but their 'active' negotiation would prompt a sceptical questioning over 'whether the "pure" dominant reading is ever achieved. There is probably no one audience group positioned in perfect ideological centrality. All groups will need to "shift" the text slightly to fit their social positions...' (*ibid.*). Fiske argues that in order for the television text to be popular it must be 'open' enough to accommodate the diversity of negotiated meanings (*ibid.*: 298). In this respect, television texts as examples of discourse, 'or a number of discourses if [they contain] contradictions' (*ibid.*: 301-302), are 'polysemic to a certain extent' and are thus heterogeneous, meeting the needs of heterogeneous audiences (*ibid.*: 298).[78] Fiske (1989: 149) prioritises the power of the reader when, drawing on

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[78] David Buckingham's (1987: 36) earlier *EastEnders* research similarly responded to the 'effects' tradition by attempting to disprove assumptions that younger audiences were vulnerable to the power of television's dangerous and manipulative messages. His discussion about how the soap opera genre possesses 'a greater degree of 'openness' or 'indeterminancy' than many other television genres' reflects Fiske's later position, summarised above, on the 'active audience', although it does not fall into the 'Dominant Audience' end of the continuum as described by Abercrombie and Longhurst. The soap opera's popular appeal to a wide and diverse audience thus relies on its ability to provide a range of cultural knowledges and discursive positions 'from which it may be read and understood' (*ibid.*: 86). Soaps tend to 'deny' viewers the possibility of interpreting the text from a 'single fixed position' (*ibid.*: 36). However, Buckingham is cautious to suggest that there are unlimited opportunities for readers to make meaning from a text. While the text is structured in a way that does not impose a 'preferred'

Hall's (1986) theory of articulation, he explores how the text works in a 'reader-centered way' (as opposed to the 'text-centered way'), with the reader ultimately activating the text's potential meaning. Fiske writes:

> To *articulate* has two meanings – one is to speak or utter (the text-centered meaning) and the other is to form a flexible link with, to be hinged with (the reader-centered meaning in which the text is flexibly linked with the reader's social situation). What a text "utters" determines, limits, and influences the links that can be made between it and its readers, but it cannot make them or control them. Only readers can do that. For a text to be popular, it must "utter" what its readers wish to say, and must allow those readers to participate in their choice of its utterances (for texts must offer multiple utterances) as they construct and discover its points of pertinences in their social situation. (Fiske 1989: 149, emphasis in original)

Although Fiske maintains that the theory of articulation allows for an acknowledgement that the text provides 'a wide but not limitless, range of productive uses' (*ibid.*), the notion of the reader's productivity is significant in his account of the pleasures that consumers derive from popular culture and is particularly crucial in his conception of fandom. Drawing on Barthes's (1975) distinction between the readerly text, which is relatively closed and undemanding, thus inviting passive reception, and the writerly text, which challenges and invites participation in the constructing of meaning, Fiske asserts that some popular texts are more polysemic, or 'producerly', than others. Popular producerly texts, like readerly ones, are more accessible than difficult, exclusive avant-garde literary, writerly texts. However, they contain the same openness of the writerly text while exposing the limitations and contradictions of the text's dominant preferred meanings. This openness provides gaps and spaces for creative readerly intervention and 'for whole new texts to be produced in them' (Fiske 1989: 104). The popular icon Madonna and her ability to attract a wealth of fans supports an illustration of the more polysemic, open text, which allows Fiske to explore how fans 'choose only those texts that offer opportunities to resist, evade, or scandalize (hegemonic force)' (*ibid.*: 105). For some audience members, Madonna represents and reproduces patriarchy and subordination. For the active,

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ideology, it nevertheless offers viewers 'an ideological *terrain*, on which a limited range of meanings may be negotiated' (*ibid.*: 86, emphasis in original). In this sense the television text holds a certain degree of 'power'. However, without viewers' 'active involvement' its 'meaning' cannot be produced (*ibid.*: 157). Hence, while the text invites viewers, for example, to make certain moral or ideological judgments, the outcome of those judgments 'at the point of reception' may be far from predictable (*ibid.*: 174). What is notable, however, as Nightingale (1996: 87) observes, is that Buckingham's focus on how the formal qualities of the text may have encouraged diverse interpretations, tended to result in a lack of attention to 'the struggles in discourse in which [the text] was grounded'. While Nightingale does not extend this into a detailed example, one that comes to mind is Buckingham's examination of some of the children's rhetorical use of moral discourse which was reminiscent of Mary Whitehouse's moral position about the bad effects of the show. In this instance Buckingham (1987: 178) stops short in noting that this discursive mimicking generates the children's concerns about the effects of media onto people 'other' than themselves. There is no sense of an understanding about what type of work these utterances may perform in the context of the children's group responses to his 'unstructured' interviewing. Did the 'working class' children who recognised working class characters as 'authentic', for example, assert moral concern because of the presence of Buckingham, the researcher, for whom they may have felt a desire to perform themselves as informed, culturally legitimate individuals and not the 'duped' child audience?

discriminating and productive readers of the pop music star, who are likely to fit Fiske's description of fandom, Madonna is a 'site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young' (1992a: 305). Fans, for Fiske, hence are distinct from others in their reading practices, and the texts they choose are far from ordinary. He writes,

> Fans are excessive readers: Fan texts are excessively popular. Being a fan involves active, enthusiastic, partisan, participatory engagement with the text. Fandom is part of what Bourdieu identifies as proletarian cultural practice, in contrast to the bourgeois distant, appreciative, critical stance to texts.
>
> Fans may differ from less excessive popular readers in degree, but not in kind. Fandom is characterized by two main activities: discrimination and productivity. Fans draw sharp and tolerant lines between what, or who they are fans of and what they are not. (Fiske 1989: 146-147).

Fiske relies on Bourdieu's (1994 [1979]) work *Distinction* for his understanding of the way in which popular culture and fandom operate under the conditions of their subordination to dominant, official culture. Bourdieu's empirical study in 1970s France showed that more middle-class leisure practices such as attending the opera, listening to classical music, watching avant-garde films, and drinking fine French wine are deemed 'legitimate' by intellectuals and the bourgeoisie. These practices demand a rational, critical distance, in order to appreciate high art's intended meanings. The bourgeoisie distinguish themselves from proletarian culture, which enjoys more 'vulgar', less intellectual activities such as wrestling, sports or watching mainstream popular films and TV. The appreciation of intellectual high-culture and its distinction from low-culture or improper bad taste, is nourished by the dominant ideology of the educational system. Distinctions in taste, the accumulation of different capitals (economic, social, cultural) fostered by education and other cultural factors, however, are disguised, becoming naturalised by those who have acquired them. As Fiske (1989: 121) summarises, 'A critical industry has been developed around [high art] to highlight, if not actually create, its complexity and thus draw masked but satisfying distinctions between those who can appreciate it and those who cannot'.

Fiske (*ibid.*: 46) argues that proletarian culture can be understood as a form of popular culture, or as 'that produced by a people subordinated by class in a capitalist society'. Conceptions of class are thus closely interconnected with culture, although Fiske is careful to note that there is much diversity within class groups, which challenges assumptions that class may be a primary 'axis of domination and subordination' (*ibid*). Hence, in spite of class, as suggested by Hobson, women of different classes 'can and do "participate" in soap opera in a way that parallels what Bourdieu has identified as a mark of proletarian culture, but that can be generalized out to refer to the culture of the subordinate, or popular culture' (*ibid.*: 47). As implied in Hobson's and other feminist media studies research, women's tastes and those of the proletariat have links

because they both belong to 'disempowered classes and thus can easily align themselves with the practices of popular culture, for the people are formed by social allegiances among the subordinate' (*ibid.*).

Reflecting Hobson's emphasis on the consumer/producer battle for ownership, Fiske understands the pleasure fans receive from their discriminate consumption of popular culture's more open texts and their productive circulation of meaning (semiotic, enunciative and textual; (Fiske 1992b: 37-39) [79] through 'metaphors of struggle' (strategy vs. tactics; bourgeoisie vs. proletariat; evasion of ideology [1989: 47]). It seems unsurprising that Michel de Certeau's (1984) understanding of the practices of everyday life and his construction of a military metaphor to explain the struggle between powerful capitalist forces and weaker subordinate groups enters into Fiske's explanation of popular culture. Society's disempowered groups thus engage in 'tactics' in which they identify the weak points of the powerful, and attack in guerrilla warfare (Fiske 1989: 19). If '[c]onsumption is a tactical raid upon the system' (*ibid.*: 35), then fans, as the most excessive consumers, are the most tactical in their oppositional reading and textual production practices. In this respect, fan consumption is conceived as more unusual and subversive because it involves more active production. 'Semiotic warfare' (*ibid.*, quoting Eco 1986) therefore characterises the ways in which fans steal fragments from products of capitalism, in the form of bricolage (see Hebdige 1979), and create their own space/culture.

This reading of the popular consumer and fan as textually productive individuals involved in an attack against official culture, presents a contentious argument. Cornel Sandvoss (2005: 14), for example, argues that Fiske's use of de Certeau's military analogy raises questions which his approach has difficulty answering. Do fan pleasures necessarily always oppose power systems and do 'such pleasures work to erode or sustain power relations in society'? Similarly, Fiske's singular 'understanding of the origins of hegemonic power', based on his reading of Bourdieu and his focus on 'those on the receiving end of cultural hegemony', does not account for more complex power relations (*ibid.*). Fiske thus locates the centre of cultural power primarily in official culture, however, as Sandvoss (*ibid.*) asserts, by the end of the twentieth century, it becomes more apparent that control of the means of cultural production extends 'beyond the reach of the bourgeoisie as a class entity'. Sandvoss adds:

> Transnational corporations such as Bertelsmann or News Corporation and their subsidiaries are producers and distributors of fan texts ranging from *Run DMC* (BMG) to the *X-Files* (Fox), which clearly pursue different goals from bourgeois 'high culture'. Moreover, as the recurring spats between

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[79] Fiske (1992b: 37-39) describes the productivity of fans in these three categories. Semiotic productivity 'consists of the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity'. He notes that Madonna fans and Radway's romance fans engaged in semiotic activity when they created their own meanings or legitimated their own values 'against patriarchal ones'. Enunciative productivity characterises a more social form of meaning making which expresses the 'use of a semiotic system' in a social context. Textual productivity describes fans' creative and artistic productions such as fan fiction, filking, video production, which Fiske claims do not typically involve economic exchange, as they are produced specifically for fans by fans.

> musicians and their record labels, such as the high-profile case of George Michael, or between athletes and their clubs illustrate, even within the realm of the production of popular culture we find conflicts of interest between financiers, producers and performers. Hence it is increasingly difficult to identify 'dominant' and 'oppositional' readings. (*ibid.*)

With respect to the difficulties inherent in the 'IRP', as noted in Chapter 1, and the problem it creates through its assumption about the unitary nature of power as exercised through a dominant power bloc, Sandvoss cites Livingstone's (1998) account of audience readings of *Coronation Street*. This work showed that within the conventions of the soap opera genre, 'preferred readings are often in opposition to otherwise hegemonic cultural values' (Sandvoss 2005: 14). As the dominant meaning usually inscribed within the soap opera suggests romantic cynicism (marriages are unhappy and end in divorce, etc.), then a more idealistic, romantic reading would be considered oppositional, even though this reading, in turn, endorses a dominant ideology of romantic love (see also Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 22). Similarly, the example of Madonna also illustrates the awkwardness of the model in relation to the notion of dominant and resistant readings. As a site of contradiction, Madonna 'sanctions revolt and individual construction of image and identity, yet the form in which she carries out her revolt is that of models of the fashion and consumer industries' (Kellner 1995: 292, quoted in Sandvoss 2005: 18). Teenage girls may resist reading the icon as an object of the gaze or as submissive to patriarchy, however, others may go against the grain and 'resist' these more 'dominant', acceptable readings of her as offering emancipation from such constraints, as these readings '[legitimise] existing power relations of the culture industry and [simplify] complex social issues' (Sandvoss 2005: 18, citing Schulze *et al.* 1993).

The question of examining audience and fan responses within their specific circumstances of reception and contexts of social interaction, which may draw attention to other foci of power, such as those involving gender, age or ethnic difference (see Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 35), is thus crucial to understanding fan pleasures. In the case of my own research it became clear from the time of my multi-sited pilot study that a theoretical focus on dominant and oppositional readings proved increasingly unhelpful. For example, one fan's close reading of textual and generic inconsistencies within a *Sopranos* episode, which triggered a lengthy flame-war in Sopranoland.com, illustrated a quality that is typical of what Fiske might consider 'good' or 'ideal' fan behaviour, suggesting that the fan fell nicely into the category of an alternative reader who was unwilling to accept the conditions of the text. One could argue, however, that this type of reading could, in fact, be considered dominant and not oppositional, in the context of the fan community's expectations of 'good' practice. On the other hand, an attempt could be made to understand the fan's argument as taking an oppositional stance in relation to the group, as his/her assumed 'female' gendered reading of the text, which suggested more spectacular, soap-opera, open-ended possibilities, was positioned in the minority, compared to the more 'masculine' reading of the rest of the group which preferred a more closed narrative. This

theoretical assumption is however highly contestable if we observe that the fan actually adhered to similar reading conventions as his/her opponents, in his/her speculations which included close examination of narrative and extratextual sources. In line with Sandvoss's example above, and as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 34) assert, this case draws attention to the specific historical conditions of contemporary media consumption: as the television text itself is subject to a more fragmented production process in the era of Post-Fordism (see my discussion in Chapter 2), '[t]he achievement of a preferred reading' becomes increasingly difficult or 'persistently vulnerable and insecure'. These observations also reflect Evans' (Evans 1990: 159, quoted in Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 35) assertion that '[i]f a particular group, say adolescents, is typified by rebelliousness, then it would be sociologically inconsistent to label a rebellious adolescent reading as oppositional; indeed given this contextualization, it would be the non-rebellious response that would be resistant'. Overall, these points emphasise that it can never be entirely clear what might be considered a dominant reading here or an oppositional one, as this complex fan narrative, as I have begun to explore in Chapter 1, with reference to Hills's (2001; 2002) 'community of imagination', is dependent upon the context of a specific group of audience members 'and what purpose is served by the interpretation' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 34). For the fan created newsgroup, the 'purpose' the fan created interpretative secondary text serves is related to the fact that it is constructed or 'performed' specifically for an imagined audience of others (Hills 2002: 204) who provide the possibility to reflect the object of fandom as well as the individual's fan identity back to them. By emphasising fan performance and its relationship to processes of commodification, it therefore makes sense to move away from the problematic focus on ideological reading positions to a consideration of the discursive significance of fans' 'talk' which is inevitably caught up in the wider cultural struggles within which the television text is implicated (cf. Nightingale 1996: 88).

3.4 READING THE COMMUNITY OF FANDOM

While Hobson's long-term participant-observation with a television production company and viewers in the context of their own domestic settings suggested a more 'ethnographic'[80] approach to the study of media audiences, studies such as Penley's (1991), Bacon-Smith's (1992), and Jenkins's (1992), have been firmly located within the context of a social network of women readers outside the private sphere of the home who share with others their experiences and pleasures of reading and consuming popular fictions. With reference to some of the difficulties Fiske's theory presents, I want to structure the following discussion by drawing attention to Henry Jenkins's early work.

Fiske's assumptions about fandom's creative, productive potential for circulating meaning with a community of others, supported by de Certeau's cultural poaching model, are extended by

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[80] The appropriation of this term to describe media audience reception research in the field of cultural studies is an area I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4.

Jenkins (1992), an earlier student of Fiske (see Jenkins 1992: 5). Jenkins (1992: 22) argues, in his comparison of Ien Ang's (1985) *Dallas* fans and the fans of *Star Trek*, that the *Dallas* letter writers' experience of fandom was in isolation, without support from a group of other viewers. In order to examine how *Dallas* presented itself as 'pleasurable' to its non-US Dutch audience, Ang placed a short and simple advertisement in a Dutch women's magazine which noted that she liked watching *Dallas* 'but often [got] odd reactions to it' (*ibid*: 10). Her invitation to viewers to write to her about why they liked or disliked the show prompted replies that largely drew on dominant discourses of the ideology of mass culture as the means of articulating their ambiguous relationship to the serial. Jenkins (1992: 22) notes that these *Dallas* viewers may have been led to respond to Ang's advertisement as an expression of their desire to 'overcome these feelings of cultural isolation, to gain a larger identity as fans apart from the alienation imposed on them by dominant discourse about mass culture'. Jenkins emphasises that *Star Trek* fans already established their identity within the larger social network of a community of fans and thus they were able to

> speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic. Indeed, one of the most heard comments from new fans is their surprise in discovering how many people share their fascination with a particular series, their pleasure in discovering that they are not "alone". (*ibid.*: 23)

Like Fiske, Jenkins (1992: 2) recognises fans as different from casual viewers for their rich cultural contribution and collective identity as they actively participate in the creation of a 'new form of "community" ' (*ibid.*). The process of rereading and redefining the original text is not conducted in isolation but becomes a 'collaborative' meaning making activity, what Jenkins describes as the group's 'meta-text' (1992: 98), contributing to and influencing the culture and textual production of the fan community as a whole. This communal production, based on critical attention to popular texts which fans also hold in close emotional proximity, transgresses notions of bourgeois taste as described by Bourdieu. Legitimate or proper culture is thus threatened by the improper tastes of the trash aesthetics of popular culture and its surrounding fandom. Jenkins (*ibid.*: 17) writes, 'Fan culture muddies those boundaries, treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts'.

Jenkins's theoretical approach to the study of a community of fans is first positioned in contrast to Morley's (1980) earlier work, which he argues participated in a type of 'misreading', 'which constructs a scholarly reading of the program against which to understand the deviations of various groups of popular readers' (1992: 33). The use of de Certeau's model does not completely reject academic authority, however 'it questions the institutional power that values one type of meaning over all others' (*ibid.*). The application of encoding/decoding, for Jenkins, also suggests 'that popular meanings are fixed and classifiable' and that each reader inhabits a 'stable position from which to make sense of a text rather than having access to multiple sets of

discursive competencies by virtue of [sic] more complex and contradictory place within the social formation' (*ibid.*: 34). As noted earlier in my introductory chapter, Jenkins also argues against research that focuses exclusively on analyses of single texts and their fan cultures, stressing the importance of approaching media fans as intertextual readers or 'cultural nomads' (*ibid.*: 39). Like the subcultural youth communities who were examined earlier in the British cultural studies tradition, fans thus form their 'alternative culture' not only through their relationship to certain TV texts, but through their appropriation of a wide range of goods from the domain of dominant culture (*ibid.*).

Focussing on media fans as nomadic textual poachers places an emphasis on meaning making as an unfixed process and popular interpretation as more fluid, as fans appropriate the repertoire of cultural products available and continually re-evaluate their personal and collective relationship to them. It is important to reflect on Jenkins's contention that fans do give priority to some media products over others, 'precisely because they seem to hold special potential as vehicles for expressing the fans' pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests' (*ibid.*: 34). The ideological constructions of these 'special' texts, therefore, may be compatible with the ideological commitments of the fan, and will invite ideologically incorporated readings as well as resistant ones, if the programme's narratives and plot developments later fail to live up to fans' expectations. With this acknowledgement of the compatibility of the ideological in the text with the fan's ideological investments, Jenkins appears to position himself in a qualifying act of self-defence in which he attempts to ward off accusations of the romanticisation of fan activity. He is thus careful not to suggest that fan activity is 'always' oppositional. 'Readers are not *always* resistant; *all* resistant readings are not necessarily progressive readings; the "people" do not *always* recognize their conditions of alienation and subordination' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). Jenkins's argument, however, like Fiske's, based on his larger investment in de Certeau's model, re-enforces the position of the fan as a 'powerless', alienated subject in potential conflict with the intentions of media producers. He writes,

> De Certeau's term, "poaching," forcefully reminds us of the potentially conflicting interests of producers and consumers, writers and readers. It recognises the power differential between the "landowners" and the "poachers"; yet it also acknowledges ways fans may resist legal constraints on their pleasure and challenge attempts to regulate the production and circulation of popular meanings. And, what is often missed, de Certeau's concept of "poaching" promises no easy victory for either party. Fans must actively struggle with and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials; fans must confront media representations on an unequal terrain. (Jenkins 1992: 32-33)[81]

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[81] Where Jenkins (1992: 44-49) differs from de Certeau is in his assertion that the reading/poaching activity in fan culture is more permanent than the transient, poached culture of the reader that de Certeau proposes. Jenkins's fan readers/poachers are also different from de Certeau's more isolated, self-serving readers, because they are engaged in the collective, social process of reading (Jenkins 1992: 45). Where de Certeau draws a distinction between readers and writers, Jenkins emphasises fandom's blurring of reader/writer consumer/producer positions as fans produce their own cultural products from their active

Referring to this position in a later interview with Hills, Jenkins (Hills & Jenkins 2001) reflected on the limitations of the textual poaching model, in which the notion of a fought over territorial space with division of roles 'paints you into certain quarters, theoretically'. Fiske's and Jenkins's earlier theoretical reliance on de Certeau is thus problematic because the model is premised on the notion that there is a clear separation between those holding capitalist power, who, through 'strategy', construct places and subordinating structures, and the powerless fan who engages in poaching 'tactics', which enable them to invade place and turn it into their own space (Fiske 1989: 32-33). In this formulation, fans 'make do' with the constraints of their landlord's dwelling, and in doing so, they adapt, manipulate, and trick the capitalist system. With this point in mind, Sandvoss's commentary above alludes to Hills's assertion (2002: 36) (and my investigation in Chapter 2 which considered ways in which the industry targets niche audiences in order to secure fan loyalty) that fan consumption practices, 'far from challenging the interests of TV producers and the power relationships through which capital circulates, are rapidly recuperated within discourses and practices of marketing'. While Jenkins (1998, quoted in Jones 2003) has suggested that the TV industry's cultivation and marketing of fan texts reflects a move that attempts to deflect the threat of fan politics to corporate power, Jones (2003: 167, emphasis in original) asserts that this practice merely exemplifies 'the ordinary logic of capitalism', reminding us that 'media fans are media consumers *par excellence*', and hence exist well within the ideology of commercial culture, rather than in tactical opposition to it. Extending this emphasis, Hills (2002: 39) argues that de Certeau's model has difficulty accommodating the possibility that 'consumer and consumer-as-producer identities' may blur. While Jenkins's (1992) or Bacon-Smith's (1992) (see also Penley [1991]) accounts of fan 'filking' (music making), fan fiction, fan art (and the 'slash' genre)[82] and fanzine production appear to sit easily within the de Certeau framework, as these are producerly texts (created largely by female fans) that seem to display political resistance to official texts, and 'given that fanzine producers have no 'space' of their own' (Hills 2002: 39), Hills notes that other examples, such as the case of 'professionalised fans writing for *Cult Times*', or 'the fan-producer of a BBC-licensed *Doctor Who* audio drama' reveal the model's limitations (*ibid.*: 39-40).[83]

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consumption of 'preproduced stories' (1992:45). Fandom is thus considered a transformative activity, altering the ordinary 'experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community' (*ibid.* 46).

[82] Slash is a female fan created literary genre, although also extended into visual art practice, which posits alternative 'homoerotic affairs between series protagonists' such as Kirk/Spock (Jenkins 1992: 186).

[83] Jenkins (1992: 46-47) notes the 'close ties' between science fiction fandom and professional science fiction writers, and acknowledges that fan publishing provides a useful training ground for future professional writing. His conclusion that the importance of media fan cultural production exceeds its role for professional training and commercial profit, however, remains committed to a focus on fandom as a distinctive, alternative subculture. The larger theoretical implications of the merging of fan and

Jones (2002) also provides a convincing argument against assumptions that the slash genre is a practice based on deviant reading tactics. This theory attempts to explain fans' reading pleasures and absorptions with characters and narrative, supported in communal textual production, through the model of resistance. Rather than suggest, as Bacon-Smith (1992) and Penley (1991)[84] have, that the heterosexual, female-authored investments in male/male manifestations emerge as a form of terrorism, a type of 'guerrilla erotics' (Penley 1991: 135), or as 'an explicit critique of masculinity' (Jenkins 1992: 219), Jones argues that slash stories 'extend certain narrative logics into the realm of sexuality' (Jones 2002: 81). In newer forms of slash in online contexts, a wider variety of gender combinations and sexual practices emerge alongside traditional male/male narratives, suggesting that there is something about the construction of cult television characters 'that both invites and tolerates such diversity of use, and which is not adequately accounted for by the 'incorporation/resistance paradigm' that has dominated and conditioned studies of audiences, fans and slash fiction' (*ibid.*). By examining the deeper textual strategies of cult television, it is possible to uncover slash's revealing of cult television's 'latent textual elements', and its close relationship to 'textual and metatextual operations' (*ibid.*: 82).

3.4.1 The value of cultural capital

As the above overview has implied, fan studies' previous preoccupations with fan productivity, Harrington and Bielby (1995: 113) argue, have tended to create a distinction between the fan and non-fan, thus reducing the understanding of a more complex continuum of fanship (a term they define as 'a process of activity *and* identity' [*ibid.*: 117, emphasis in original]), to a definition based solely on participation in fan activities, 'so the question becomes merely, Does she participate or doesn't she?' (*ibid.*:113.). Returning to Hills's (2001a; 2002) criticisms which I pointed to in Chapter 1, this tendency has led to a fostering of the construction of the fan as a 'good' active (anti-capitalist) subject in contrast to the 'bad' passive consumer. Hills's evaluation of fan studies' appropriation of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital provides a useful point from which to consider further the wider theoretical implications of the construction of this kind of moral dualism.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has surfaced as an important point of departure in fan studies attempts to theorise fan practices and/or fans' relationship to their choices of fandom which may reflect their social class positioning (although this does not exclude other demographic variables) (see Thomas 2002; and Sandvoss 2005). To summarise broadly, for Bourdieu, the acquiring of legitimate cultural tastes and competences is understood as a way of accumulating certain levels of cultural capital, which in turn has consequences for one's purchase of other forms of capital, such as social, and significantly, economic capital. As Fiske

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professional/commercial identities, with respect to his use of de Certeau's work, therefore tend to be ignored.

[84] See also Penley, C. (1997) *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America*. London and New York: Verso.

summarises, '[c]ultural capital thus works hand in hand with economic capital to produce social privilege and distinction' (1992b: 31). The dominant bourgeoisie are seen to possess high levels of economic, social, and cultural capital. The dominated bourgeoisie (artists, bohemians, scholars) have more cultural capital than economic and are distinct from the petit bourgeois who possess middle range levels of capital (Hills 2002: 47). The proletariat, or the subordinate working class, are the social category who are seen as most lacking in both cultural and economic capital.

Hills (2002: 48, citing Bourdieu 1984: 386) argues that the problem with Bourdieu's view of fandom, which relates it to the above four group categorisations, is the assumption of 'the legitimacy of a fixed and monolithically legitimate 'cultural capital', rather than considering how 'cultural capital' may, at any single moment of culture-in-process, remain variously fragmented, internally inconsistent and struggled over'. The variety of cultural knowledges and types of education across the cultural field are also subject to certain 'networks of value' (Hills 2002: 49). This point has particular consequences for the way in which the notion of cultural capital is appropriated to describe practices within various communities, subcultures, and groups across class distinctions. As Hills (*ibid.*: 49, emphasis in original) notes, Bourdieu's overly fixed model suggests a neglect of 'the possibility that struggles over the legitimacy of 'cultural capital' may occur both between and *within* class fractions, communities and subcultures'.

As Hills (2002) and others[85] have observed, theorists such as Fiske (1992b) and Sarah Thornton (1995) have developed Bourdieu's concept of habitus and cultural capital. Fiske (1992b) wishes to place more emphasis on the social discrimination of gender, race and age, areas which he argues Bourdieu marginalises in favour of focusing on economics and class (Fiske 1992b: 32). Fiske's term 'popular habitus' is created in opposition to Bourdieu's conception of the dominant habitus. Fiske argues that the use of one's textual knowledge in the context of the dominant habitus serves primarily as a form of critical discrimination between texts. In contrast, the fan's extensive knowledge of the text in the popular habitus promotes participation and enhancement of power over the text. Fans' accumulation of knowledge about their object of fandom thus produces 'fan cultural capital' and is useful in helping fan communities distinguish themselves from other groups who do not possess the same level of knowledge (as is illustrated in Bourdieu's model of social distinction), while also constructing distinctions within fan communities (*ibid.*: 42-43). This knowledge therefore provides the fan 'expert' with prestige and thus becomes a useful 'source of power' (1992b: 43).

This last observation about the fan's attainment of prestige in the fan community is an important point, as it tends to suggest the significance of the role of social capital, however, Fiske does not

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[85] See for example Jancovich (2000) and Thomas (2002) on their discussions about Thornton (1995). See also Sandvoss's (2005) review of Fiske (1992b) and Thornton (1995).

develop this idea in his examples. Hills first observes that Fiske's example of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* fans, who are compared to 'the Shakespeare buff' (Fiske 1992b: 43), 'ignores the fact that *Rocky Horror* fans may well discriminate between different stagings of the show, evaluating them in relation to an ideal or in relation to the film version' (Hills 2002: 51). Fiske's neglect of the possible links between the popular and dominant habitus, in favour of constructing a binary opposition, attempts to create, in Hills's (2002: 52) words, 'some kind of stable theoretical distinction between 'good' popular culture and 'bad' high culture'. Hence, in focusing exclusively on the issue of cultural capital, and prioritising a conceptualisation of popular cultural capital as 'anti-economic' (*ibid.*) the implications of the question of social capital in fan communities, upon which fans' attainment of prestige may depend, are deflected in Fiske's account.

Both Hills (2002) and Thomas (2002) recognise there is a noticeable absence of the issue of social capital in Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1994 [1979]). With respect to Thomas's (2002: 20) reflections about the possible limitations of Bourdieu's ideas for her own empirical audience study, she writes,

> ...what happens when there is a clash of dispositions, cultures, or different levels of cultural capital in one interaction? Does the dominant class inevitably dominate? Are those who do not fit in categorised as eccentric or boors? Is the recognition of the struggle for dominance in fact the only way of analysing social interactions? In the end, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as dominance will in some modest way be put to empirical test here, and it is a test which, despite the enormous detail of his own surveys, his theories were not subjected to, since nowhere does he analyse the functioning of social hierarchies of distinction in actual social interactions.

For Hills, an analysis of 'fan social capital', or 'the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses' (Hills: 2002: 57) should equal any analysis of fan cultural capital, as the two cannot be easily divorced from each other. It would be likely then, that those in possession of high fan cultural capital will also accrue much social capital in the community, although it may not necessarily follow that the knowledgeable newsgroup 'lurker' would acquire social capital as they consciously distance themselves from the fandom's organised social networks (2002: 57). Similarly, as Hills points out, it would be highly unlikely that a fan with low fan cultural capital would acquire fan social capital. This recognition of social capital is highly relevant to the findings I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7, which illustrate the various ways in which social capital in the two *Sopranos* groups is affected by performances of fan cultural capital or fan assertions of what Thornton (1995) has termed 'subcultural capital'. In some cases, for example, it became clear that some fans' claims to legitimate, acceptable fan knowledge, or their 'subcultural capital', were deemed inappropriate according to the wider values of the group. The othering that took place thus had implications for the degree to which they could achieve or sustain their level of social capital.

Hills's recognition that cultural capital has an attractive currency in academic discourse is also relevant to the concerns of this study and my production of an analytic account of the *Sopranos* forums. Hills (2002: 56, citing Stabile 1995) posits that academic critics themselves may be implicated in the same logic of distinction, whereby it is necessary to play by the rules of the scholarly game in order to avoid 'exclusion from the game itself'. With this in mind, Hills criticises Thornton's work. Thornton's research usefully identifies 'hipness' as a form of subcultural capital (1995; 1997) that could be recognised as conferring status to the individual who accumulates the right amount of knowledge about clubs, music, dance and fashion within the youth club culture. Thornton's work thus focuses on the ways in which youth subcultures construct their own moral dualisms which resemble those created by the dominant habitus, 'between a 'good' and authentic in-group and a 'bad' and deficient out-group which lacks taste and knowledge in relation to dance music', for example, the 'Sharons or Techno Tracy's' who carry handbags hence represent the feminised mainstream and are relegated to the status of 'other' (Hills 2002, citing Thornton 1995: 53). Thornton's analysis of the role of niche media and ways in which mass media may either bolster or diminish subcultural capital (eg. moral panics are useful whereas positive press coverage is not), is also useful as it addresses the gaps in Bourdieu's model which neglects the role of media in relation to cultural capital. Hills argues, however, that while Thornton recognises the problem of scholarly celebratory accounts of subcultures, which create binaries between 'mainstream' and 'subculture', she fails explicitly to consider the realm of academic publishing within which her own role as researcher is implicated. Hills thus emphasises the scholar's engagement in the cultural game of producing original academic work. As is the case of Hills's own work, which stresses a similar form of academic performativity as a means of creating a unique and recognisable space within the field,[86] the scholar 'strives to construct cultural capital (as symbolic capital) ....while preserving a sense of argument via disinterested and logical reason' (2002: 54). Thornton's logical detachment from her role as participant-observer remains one criticism, with the other centring on how Thornton's accrual of her own 'academic capital' and distinction, via the route of subcultural capital, is silenced in her account.

> In short, Thornton rails against 'us' versus 'them' accounts, but then reconstructs precisely such a moral dualism by writing out her own (academic writing) and its position within a series of overlapping fields and struggles over cultural value. While 'they' are caught up in subcultural classifications, 'we' seem able to document such struggles serenely without being implicated within them. (Hills 2002: 54).

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[86] Although Hills does not provide an extended note on this point in this section of text, he does alert the reader to the place his own work occupies in relation to this accusation. Hills's emphasis on self-reflexivity and the practice of autoethnography, a topic I will examine in more detail in Chapter 4, provides a good illustration of how the scholarly acknowledgement of the self in the research account can help avoid the construction of moral dualisms. His later work (Hills 2005b) also provides a more thoroughly detailed engagement with the discussion of scholarly performativity and the construction of theory.

The relevance of this critique in relation to this study is a focus for my discussion in Chapter 4, in which I confront epistemological concerns surrounding the production of knowledge by examining the multiple conditions which have impacted on this research and thus provided me with a 'legitimate' academic voice from which to speak. With respect to the notion of social capital, I have also considered, where relevant in Chapters 6 and 7, how I too became implicated within the social hierarchies of the two groups and how my own (subjective) feelings about the research impacted on my position and motivations as a supposedly 'detached' researcher. This conscious move strives to create a space and a contribution, in spite of some of the constraints of a PhD thesis, which can draw attention to the possible construction of dualisms of which previous studies have been accused.

3.5 TRANSLATING AND TRANSPOSING THE FAN NEWSGROUP CREATED SECONDARY TEXT

Fiske's separation of fan cultural capital from economic capital refuses to recognise the dialectical relationship between the Marxist terms of use-value (the personal usefulness of an object) and exchange value (the monetary value that is placed on the object through capitalist exchange and supply and demand), which defines fandom's essential contradictions (Hills 2002: 52). Sandvoss's (2005: 116) assertions that fandom's affective attachments function as an extension of the self, as a form of self-reflection, supports Hills's (2002) view, stressing that while fans' intensely personal use-value may provide some 'escape from the logic of exchange-value' this removal is temporary, 'as ultimately any use-value is articulated through demand and thus reintegrated into exchange-value' (Sandvoss 2005: 116). The rearticulation of fan use-value through niche market sales and advertising thus functions to reflect fan desire back to the fan yet in doing so simultaneously creates new instances of exchange value.

Hills's understanding of 'cyberspace ethnography' (2002: 177) argues that new media ethnographies that embark upon the fan newsgroup must address Internet audience data with an emphasis on this dialectic. The fan-audience constructed text is thus approached as a text for analysis, to be translated and transposed for the academic account. However, unlike face-to-face research encounters, which demand academic intervention via solicitation and textual transcription from interviews or focus groups, newsgroup audience interactions and interpretations are already 'thoroughly rather than contingently textual insofar as they are composed with an imagined audience in mind' (Hills 2002: 204). Returning to the concerns of my discussion of Hills's affective 'community of imagination', the phrase '*serialisation of the fan audience*' (*ibid.*: 177, emphasis in original) thus represents the specific context in which the performance of audiencehood is enacted in which its contradictions are emphasised and reflected back to the fan. This 'self-performance of audience-as-text' thus

> creates a second-order or implied commodification insofar as the online fan audience consumes a textual construction of itself alongside the originating

> commodity-text, with the valued novelties of the latter crossing over into the equally novel and similarly valued speculations, rewritings, and framings of the former. The online audience is hence serialised insofar as the 'secondary text' of fans' detective work uncannily parallels the hyperdiegetic narrative space of the primary text. (*ibid.*)

In Chapter 7, I will consider further the impact that the context of online fandom has had in relation to 'just-in-time fandom' (Hills 2002: 178). The implications of this phenomenon are closely related to the above discussion about social hierarchies within fandoms. The strength of this analysis will thus depend upon my translation and transposition of events which must remain sensitive to an approach that addresses fan-audience performance as a phenomenon that is directly implicated in the processes of commodification. This is not to suggest that audiences never resist or oppose capitalist initiatives, as some fan discussions do make these assertions. However, to conceptualise fandom within this constrained definition is to refuse to accept the whole fan who engages in more complex processes of identity management.

3.6 SUMMARY

In this chapter I have engaged in a critical overview of some of the significant contributions in television audience and fan studies that have arisen out of the cultural studies tradition. Much of this work has presented a series of limitations through scholars' reading and construction of audience activity, due to cultural studies' political investments in giving voice to marginalised 'interpretive communities'. Hence in privileging the 'common sense' voices of the subordinate but 'active' audience, some studies have tended to produce 'common sense' scholarly accounts which have ignored closer discourse analysis. My investigation of the application of Hall's encoding/decoding model also revealed the model's difficulties with respect to how 'ideological' or preferred meanings may be defined either within the television text itself, or within specific contexts of reception. Scholarship that characterised much of the 'second generation' of fan studies continued to pursue the active audience and found them in highly visible self-defined fan communities. These more 'ethnographic' studies provided fruitful potential for the examination of fans' highly productive, 'alternative' subcultural activity. However, it was this very potential to locate fan-audiences in 'struggle' with the television industry and creative subversion as a form of 'guerrilla warfare tactic' that also limited their theoretical scope. Fans were thus constructed as 'good' active 'doers' who embraced the collective anti-capitalist interests of an ideal and utopian subcultural community of like minded others. Chapters 6 and 7 will provide the opportunity to explore the usefulness of more recent developments that have emerged in the 'third generation' (Hills & Jenkins 2001) of fan studies which challenge the 'textual poaching' model as well as Bourdieu's model of cultural capital, whilst also making firm connections with Chapter 1 and Chapter 2's emphases on text and fan 'performance'. As I have suggested, the next chapter will extend this chapter's concerns surrounding the implications of knowledge production in the creation of fan ethnographies. By

challenging the ethnographic genre's claims for realist representation, I will explore how the construction of the autoethnographic narrative, which introduces the role of the scholar-fan's emotional relationship to both the object of fandom and the research 'object', potentially disrupts textual transparency and hence problematises any pure or authentic version of the fan community.

Chapter 4: Writing the self into ethnography

> The ethnographic life is not separable from the self. Who we are and what we can be – what we can study, how we write about that which we study – is tied to how a discipline disciplines itself and its members, its methods for claiming authority over both the subject matter and its members.
>
> (Richardson 2000: 253)

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the use of self-reflexivity in the fan-ethnographic account as a theoretical tool which aims to challenge the limitations of ethnographic knowledge production by 'holding together the epistemological and the ontological' (Probyn 1993: 4). In drawing attention to the vulnerabilities of the personal that are often unrecognised, silenced or relegated to the margins of the researcher's fieldnotes, this method of enquiry complicates realist conventions of representation and the ways in which textual strategies construct the authorial voice in relation to the 'Other'. If we agree with Laurel Richardson that 'The ethnographic life is not separable from the self' (Richardson 2000: 253), that our own identities as social analysts *and* social subjects are situated amongst uncomfortable uncertainties which are always 'incomplete', we can produce ethnographic narratives that contribute to our understanding of 'others' while also and simultaneously questioning the 'nature of the socially produced *space* from which [cultural studies] is able to speak' (Couldry 1996: 320, emphasis in original). In deploying an 'autoethnographic' narrative, I argue for the advantages of this method by exploring the ethical challenges of audience research and by making explicit the ways in which the 'personal' can directly influence research choices and processes.

4.1 THE CHALLENGE TO ETHNOGRAPHIC AUTHORITY

Through the process of immersion and interaction, the ethnographer closely observes and learns about a community's practices and rituals, offering the opportunity to make sense of and interpret cultural and social patterns of behaviour. Historically, ethnography has embarked upon the study of 'other', potentially inaccessible, non-Western societies to which the outsider ethnographer has had to make an extensive journey. The ethical problems linked with this tradition emerge out of its association with colonialist history within which 'ethnography has classically inscribed a radical distinction between the Observer and the Observed, who become the Author and the Other' (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:253). Hence earlier anthropological travellers were expected to return to their own culture with a written representation of their unusual encounter with societies from afar. Based on the author's 'firsthand experience' of lengthy observations in the field, these tales of travel held much authoritative weight in the academic canon (Van Maanen 1995 : 1). However, the ethnographer's claims for authentic 'objective' truth and knowledge about life in distant lands relied heavily on the author's ability

to persuade its audience with a 'convincing' text (Clifford 1986: 4). Ethnography has thus been largely understood as a legitimised 'storytelling institution' (Van Maanen 1995: 3), one which entices the reader by incorporating a range of formal textual strategies and conventions familiar in other literary genres.[87] This acknowledgement has led to the accusation that ethnographies are essentially aesthetically constructed 'fictions' or partial truths skilfully produced by their authors. The authorial production of an account, therefore, it has been argued, is never completely independent of the wider implications of power and history through which the author's subjectivity is constructed and through which the disciplines of anthropology and social science research are located (Clifford 1986: 7).

Cultural studies' challenge to the traditional image of the Western outsider entering non-Western remote places has emerged through the attempt to study its own complex popular culture and/or societies by adopting a variety of ethnographic methods. The label ethnography is often equated with a diverse range of sociological research practices that adopt the 'qualitative method' as opposed to the more scientific 'quantitative method' that relies on 'statistical inference' found in data collected through surveys, structured interviews and questionnaires (Hammersley 1992: 7). Many debates in media studies, however, have focussed on the shortcomings that characterised earlier audience studies of the 1980s, which, although generally described as 'ethnographic' in secondary accounts of the research,[88] largely relied on a limited range of qualitative methods such as small samples of focus group discussions and interviews. This approach was a far cry from classic ethnography which focussed on a holistic notion of culture by relying on a chosen fieldwork site and engaging in the everyday life experiences of a community for lengthy periods of time (see Malinowski 1922, cited in Press 1996: 114-117). While my study broadly embraces an 'ethnographic' approach, with its focus on the audience-text relation within the context of groups in social interaction, and through its sustained Internet fieldwork and participant-observation, it does not, however, make claims to capture the more diffuse audience community's cultural whole.[89] Indeed, following Christine Hine (2000: 59), it remains sceptical about the problems that '[a]iming for holism' introduces. As Hine writes,

> The idea of a holistic study of a given context is a disciplinary fiction which fails to acknowledge the partiality and selectivity of any ethnographic description...It also fails to take on board the full implications of interconnectedness: how can there be a holistic study of a site if its boundaries are unstable and only occasionally enacted? Where does the local stop and the global begin? (*ibid.*)

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[87] On the history of ethnography as 'story-telling institution' see the earlier work of John Van Maanen, (1988) *Tales of the Field: on Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[88] See, for example Nightingale (1996: Chapter 6) and Seiter's (1999: Chapter 2) overview. See also Moores (1993) for a further account of the ethnographic approach to media audiences.
[89] Chapter 5 provides a more detailed examination of the 'virtual' ethnographic approach (Hine 2000) this study adopts.

Geertz (1993: 6-7) notes that it is not merely the application of techniques and procedures that define the ethnographic enterprise but rather the "intellectual effort", or the interpretative activity, found in Gilbert Ryle's[90] notion of 'thick description' as opposed to the 'thin description' which characterises more scientific observation. Debates surrounding what Nightingale (1996) has described as 'the cultural studies audience experiment' have largely centred on the nature of the researcher's lack of 'descriptive acuity' and the subsequent limited generalisations rather than analysis of respondents' commentaries (Nightingale 1996: 110).[91] Nightingale (*ibid.*) specifically refers to Fiske's (1987) characterisation of audience research in the mid-1980s as ethnographic yet she argues that the work was more characteristic of 'documentarism', in which a journalistic reporting style displaced the intricacies of fieldwork, or 'the discomforts and disorientation, the paranoia and insecurity that the field work presumably engendered'. Cultural studies' specific focus on the encoding/decoding model led to a displacement of ideology 'from the text on to the audience' (*ibid.*: 61) through its attempt at 'explaining the programme through what people said about it rather than of explaining people through the way they respond to the programme' (*ibid.*: 59). Adopting the role of reporter rather than ethnographer thus placed the analyst in danger of merely recording audience's commentaries about the ideological meaning of the TV text and accepting these accounts as authentic truth. Drawing upon the audience's word as the primary source to evaluate the meaning of a TV programme is highly problematic as there is an assumption that the informants are 'in possession of a 'reality', a reality of which an account can be given' (*ibid.*: 99). This practice neglects the fact that individuals are not easily 'free' from the historical fetters of language that shape their lived experiences (Seiter 1999: 28-29). Nightingale (1996: 99) adds that the basis of an assumed authentic account relies on a definition of truth that the informant shares with the researcher, or 'it suggests both a shared culture and an awareness of one's place within that culture' (see also Hollway & Jefferson [2000: 8-12]). The discourse of potential power relationships, although complex, contradictory and multifarious, between researcher and researched, were marginalised in favour of assuming that words would mean the same thing for both parties concerned.[92]

These observations facilitate important discussions about how ethnography has been used to imagine or construct audiences to meet the historical and political needs of an emerging interdisciplinary study struggling to define itself amongst other legitimated canons within the humanities. The arrival of Clifford and Marcus's edited collection, *Writing Culture* (1986), however, inspired a surge of debates widely known as 'crisis scholarship', thus marking a 'crisis' of representation and a rigorous questioning of 'how, and with what authority, can 'I'

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[90] Geertz refers to Ryle, G. (1971) *Collected Papers: 1929-1968, Vol. 2*. London: Hutchinson.
[91] For further useful discussions see the collection of essays in Hay *et al.* (1996) and Seiter (1999).
[92] See for example Foucault 1976; 1980.

ever speak for 'others'?' (Couldry 1996: 318).[93] This reformulation of social enquiry argues for a rejection of dominant, single voice ethnographies. Rather than focussing on precise research method, authors such as Clifford and Marcus privilege the practice of writing and the 'making of texts' (1986: 2), locating ethnography as a politically motivated activity that unmasks the transparency of the realist text while challenging closed narratives and absolute truths that are characteristic of the modernist tradition. This 'epistemological turn' supports a postmodern aesthetic that is sensitive to notions of unstable boundaries, multiple identities and narratives, and the ongoing process of subjectivity and multivocality (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 254).

4.2 SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The epistemological productivity of self-reflexivity is an area that has received much attention in feminist writing,[94] yet scholarship on media fans, as Hills (2002) argues, has left this interrogation relatively under-explored in spite of many notable claims of scholar-fan self-declaration. In contrast to the 'first generation' (Hills & Jenkins 2001) of fan studies when writers such as Tulloch, Fiske, and Radway proceeded cautiously with a depersonalised critical objective distance in their pursuit of the active audience, it has now become the expected norm, or rhetorically 'fashionable' (Brooker 2000: 4) for current 'third generation' (Hills & Jenkins 2001) scholars of the last decade to announce unproblematically their close ' 'positionality' in relation to the texts they are addressing' (Brooker 2000: 4). The scholar-fan's declaration of personal experiences, interests or fannish 'love' of TV texts as well as their proximity to the communities they study, however, can never remain wholly unproblematic. Some claims toward self-reflexivity have been criticised for their limited approach to the subject of the self and thus cannot be seen as constituting a 'better' or more transgressive practice than those which produce transparent objective texts. Such debates, for example, might be usefully considered next to critiques surrounding the reflexive 'confessional' tale which elaborates a version of the ethnographer's self by appropriating the common theme of the observer as voyager and naïve intruder (Atkinson 1990: 106). Coffey's (2002: 318-319) argument that this formula tends to be descriptive and cautious, 'revealing only a detached or partial self', is echoed in Hills's (2002: 69) assessment of Bacon-Smith's (1992) reflexive admission of her desire to 'jump up and down' with excitement about her data findings of female *Star Trek* fans. Confessions of her ethnographic investigative bumbling inadequacies equally rely on the recognisable appropriation and play of detective novel formulaic conventions. These admissions of vulnerability, Hills (2002: 69) adds, serve to 'reassure the reader' that her ethnographic authority is always self-challenged yet this reassurance also depends on Bacon-Smith's presentation of a partial, objective self who holds back when emotions surface and refrains from

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[93] Couldry specifically develops Probyn's (1993) argument.
[94] See for example, Steedman 1987; Spence 1988; Walkerdine 1990; Probyn 1993; Kuhn 1995; Hirsch 1997, Brunsdon 2000; to name a few.

further reflections about the origins of these potentially irrational desires. The result is Bacon-Smith's construction of a fan culture that equates to a riddle that must be solved by the outsider, rational 'detective-ethnographer', the seeker of knowledge (*ibid.*).

The scholarly 'coming out' as insider who has lengthy access to fan experience and knowledge that typifies a different 'turn to reflexivity' (Adkins 2002: 332) in later fan scholarship might be understood in general terms as a rewarding consequence of previous political battles fought by the 'second generation' of writers such as Jenkins, Penley, and Bacon-Smith, who struggled to defend fan communities against damaging stereotypes that circulated in both popular and academic discourses (Hills & Jenkins 2001). However, as Hills's (2002) argument illustrates, if the urgency to create a position of defence about studying sites of popular culture is no longer a political stake in the cultural studies agenda, scholars must still proceed by questioning the means through which they choose to perform or legitimate their 'sense of self' in relation to the 'Other'. In light of a critical sensibility towards self-reflexive writing practices, one might need to ask then, to what political or personal ends might it serve current scholars' narration when the assertion of one's own subjectivity stops short of 'understanding the production of that subjectivity itself' (Walkerdine *et al.* 2002: 179). If the crisis in ethnography has taught us that our research participants are potentially created as fiction and fantasy, then we cannot ignore the possibility of the false construction of the authorial self (*ibid.*).

Autoethnography is described in general terms by Van Maanen (1995: 9-10) as a genre of ethnographic writing that focuses on the passionate and emotional voice of the fieldworker without surpassing the voices of the subjects under study. Coffey asserts that autoethnography specifically 'draws on the therapeutic and analytical value of personal narratives and self-stories, and makes visible that which is often dismissed or rendered invisible in qualitative inquiry' (Coffey 2002: 327; see also Ellis & Bochner 2000) . Rather than avoid theoretical contradictions or marginalise the interactive role of the ethnographer whose voice interweaves amongst many others, this acknowledgement of the self is highly self-conscious, self-reflexive and celebratory in its close examination of the analyst's discomforts which may be initially experienced through their encounters with respondents in the field. Hills (2002: Chapter 3) also stresses that autoethnography can confront the problem of the construction of an intricate array of moral dualisms that often align 'us' (the fantasised 'rational' academics) against 'them' (the fantasised 'deficient' or 'self-absent' fans) (*ibid.*). As the scholar-fan moves his/her gaze back and forth '*focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience*' then '*inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations*'(Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739, emphasis in original), autoethnography can explore further contradictions, gaps or silences in one's own self-accounts of cultural experience, which, not unlike their subject's narratives, may also be 'deficient' in their articulation (Hills 2002: 70-71).

4.3 MEMORY AND PERSONAL NARRATIVE

The fruitfulness of memory work lies in its ability to allow us to recall former periods of our cultural situatedness within the constraints of social class, race, ethnic and gendered identities, thus enabling us to make sense of our present selves (Kuhn 1995: 4).[95] Kuhn (1995) explores how memory has the capacity to shape our inner psychic worlds while also informing the cultural production of a diverse range of public 'memory texts' (*ibid.*). Kuhn's question 'What place do images and sounds occupy in the activity of remembering?' (*ibid.*: 107) also reminds us that memory work with photographs and other forms of media can offer us a way of understanding our emotional selves, our intimate relationships, and our socially shared cultural and historical moments. Photographs, memoirs, scholarly writings, and films, thus serve to prompt us, evoking memories which

> do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments. In this network, the image itself figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning making; always pointing somewhere else. (*ibid.*: 12)

Memory work is akin to a journey, which, not unlike detective work, allows one to '[patch] together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence' (*ibid.*: 4). However, unlike the closure of the mystery novel, memory work facilitates further questioning at the discovery of every clue (*ibid.*: 5). The author is left with the challenge of constructing a cohesive account, although not necessarily a linear or unproblematic one, which encompasses a life story that constantly moves back and forth between the tensions of past and present and inner and outer worlds.

The movement 'from the 'then' to 'now' ' (Brunsdon 2000: 88) which enables the negotiation of my own speaking/writing position, begins with an examination of how the historical and geographical context of my early *Sopranos* viewing informed my emotional relationship to the series which subsequently motivated the later empirical research. The exercise of memory therefore attempts to address the history and politics of my identity through some investigation of what Charlotte Brunsdon (2000: 187) calls the 'periodicity of viewing identity'. This phrase conceptualises 'the diachronic aspects of television viewing, the way in which each individual has more or less engagement with television in general, and particular programmes, at different stages in their lives' (*ibid.*).[96] The deployment of Brundson's more general 'periodicity of identity', however, also recalls Hills's wider question '*why do various fandoms become relevant and irrelevant to cultural identity at specific times?*' (Hills 2002: 82, emphasis in original). My narrative, therefore, begins with a story about the significance of television viewing choices,

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[95] See also Kuhn 2002.

[96] Brunsdon's coining of the term 'periodicity of viewing identity' develops and extends Newcomb and Hirsch's idea of the 'viewing strip' 'which describes the particular selections an individual makes from an evening's 'flow' (Brunsdon 2000: 187). See Newcomb, H. and Hirsch, P. (1983), 'Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 8/3: 45-55.

however, its implications extend beyond these boundaries, by touching upon the ways in which audiences might speak about and value a range of fan interests at different moments in the construction of their cultural identities (*ibid.*). Finally, the interrogation of these moments forces me to retrace my scholar-fan performance in the 'virtual field'. One of the key questions this work allows me to consider is how my fantasised desires for a nostalgic return to a past home in the US, a place of belonging that shaped my earlier working-class identity, inspired the research and intruded upon my interactions with fans. Hence this work draws attention to the liminal quality of ethnographic research (Jackson 1995) as well as prompting a questioning of how 'once-working-class academics' (Medhurst 2000: 32) might write about the liminality that characterises their uneasy experience in the middle-class academic sphere.[97] Considering autoethnography's emphasis on constructing a multivocal text, my hope is that this reflexive chapter moves past the particulars of the personal, and will make connections to the voices of others by exploring ways in which fan objects offer individuals the possibility of finding an 'emotional home' (Harrington & Bielby 2005; Sandvoss 2005).

4.4 TRAVELLING ACROSS COMMUNITIES

The birth of my second child Eva, not long after my son turned three and I completed an MA in Visual Culture, is a useful point of departure. When Eva was about two weeks old, my morning routine included taking my son to a local playgroup for two and a half hours, four days out of the week. During that time I would run shopping errands, rush home to catch up with sleep, tidy the household, phone or have coffee with a friend, watch daytime TV, or view on video the latest episode of *The Sopranos*. Exhaustion was one reason, accompanied by my increasing academic interest in the series, which was fuelled during a time when pre-and post-broadcast British press reviews hailed the show as a masterpiece example of 'quality' TV,[98] why I videotaped *The Sopranos'* first series as I struggled to stay awake during its usual 10 pm Sunday night broadcast time.

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[97] Sally Munt's (2002) edited collection *Cultural Studies and The Working Class: Subject to Change*, for example, offers insightful avenues for exploring this area.

[98] Lacey (2002), for example, observes that the early Season One UK audience for *The Sopranos* were few in numbers. Drawing on industry audience figures, Lacey notes that *The Sopranos* was not followed by the mass audience but more likely a 'cult one' consisting of 'a significant number of people within a particular sector of the public (older, professional, educated) whose relationship to the show has been carefully represented and reviewed in particular newspapers, specifically *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph*' (*ibid.*: 96). It was these broadsheets with their lengthy, critical reviews of the show's 'quality' that addressed a dedicated middle-class readership 'thus indicating that the British audience for *The Sopranos* has also been drawn from this section of society' (*ibid.*: 97). This address to middle-class readers, such as myself, was attractive to me for various reasons, not least because it seemed to confirm that I 'belonged' within this community of readers and target audience for the series. The construction of the show as 'quality' also inspired my critical 'academic' questioning of the terms used to define the series. This enquiry thus seemed to provide me with another sense of belonging which I began to feel within the academic community after successfully completing my MA course.

Along with my white, middle-class positioning during this periodicity of identity, my age, heterosexual and gendered status, played equally significant roles in my introduction to *The Sopranos* as both a fan and as a scholar. Having Eva became an emotionally difficult time for me, a crisis of identity during which I felt caught up in the middle of the many conflicting discourses surrounding motherhood and work. The pleasure I was expected to feel at being able to have a second child in my late thirties was constantly challenged with feelings of frustration, not to mention anger, when there was little help from extended family, and my male partner quickly returned to his more prestigious academic career, often involving frequent travel away. I increasingly felt loss over the career I left in London before I had my son, and began to feel my MA study might have been a waste of time. My life seemed to progress from enjoying the intellectual challenges of post-graduate study as my three-year old was getting closer to school age, to hardly finding a minute to myself to read the weekend papers when I wasn't incapacitated by fatigue.

In short, I felt I would be deemed a 'feminist' failure if I did not make some attempt to make clear decisions about my future. It was not long after Eva turned 18 months old before these motivations propelled me to embark on contract teaching and later in the following two years develop a proposal to study *The Sopranos* and its Internet fandom. I now see this move as one that articulated many complex desires and identifications, including some attempt to extend my own fan pleasures with the series through academic discourse. In Brunsdon's (2000: 89-90) focus on the genre of autobiography, she hypothesised 'that the construction of the identity 'feminist' necessitated the construction of a non-feminist other', whom Brunsdon labels 'the housewife' (*ibid.*). While I can not claim that the same feminist theoretical underpinnings frame my audience project, it would, however, also appear that my middle-class, 'feminist' fears about having to rely on the financial earnings of a man and being tied down to the home, implicitly created a binary to an 'other', the 'ordinary woman'. Although I remained sensitive from the beginning of the study to the ethical problems this type of othering would present if recreated in the research, I seemed to neglect a consideration of how the nature of my 'arrival' to this middle-class, 'feminist' positioning may have affected my relationship to the series, its online fandom and my later research choices.

At this point in the discussion, the tone of the prose shifts a bit as I use a different kind of memory work to help make sense of this journey. As I was not in the habit of keeping a diary of my life at the time when Eva was born, *The Sopranos'* scene or scenes that first generated an intensity of emotional responses in me might be usefully revisited through what Carolyn Ellis (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 749, 752)[99] calls the process of 'emotional recall'. If I take my mind

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[99] If past events are not recorded through writing at the time they happen yet are remembered as emotionally evocative, Ellis (2000: 751) writes, they can be accessed and reconstructed as story later. This approach does not rely on definitions of pure truth claims and scientific validity, but emerges from 'the position that language is not transparent and there's no single standard of truth' (*ibid*). Therefore concerns over whether our writing about past 'truths' is biased by our present perceptions about the

back to one morning I imagine myself, in the present tense, in the living room of our three bedroom Victorian terraced house, lying down on our sofa wearing a worn, faded pink towelling dressing gown and slippers. I see myself turn to baby Eva who is swaddled in what I believe I remember to be the hand crocheted blanket that an American high school friend gave me several months earlier when I returned to Boston, the area where I grew up, for my grandmother's funeral when I was three months pregnant. Eva is sleeping in the Moses basket another friend from Bristol lent us which is placed in front of the Ikea bookcase that is tightly packed with a selection of my partner's old vinyl LPs, a mixture of novels, and oversized art books, some of which I shipped over from the States. This bookcase sits in one alcove next to the fireplace while the TV and its cupboard occupies the other. I remember nothing much of anything else now except that I recall feeling a heaviness in my body of the same type that weighed me down many of those mornings and I now imagine myself slowly sitting up to turn off the TV after *The Sopranos'* credits roll down the screen. I see my hair in a mess and imagine there are dark circles under my puffy eyes. I then see myself sobbing, and searching through my pockets for tissue to wipe my eyes and runny nose. I am now looking at this newborn baby and I think about my father's mother, the woman after whom I named my daughter. I then say her name 'Eva' and I tell my deceased grandmother how much I miss her.

My memory tells me this sadness had something to do with viewing a *Sopranos* scene involving Livia Soprano, the monstrous mother figure with whom the central character Tony struggles to come to terms throughout his long-term psychotherapy sessions. This flash of recognition that takes me to the memory of my grandmother, whom I have since then claimed bears a striking resemblance to Livia, however, is still difficult to discern. As a way of attempting to revisit the emotional event I decide to rewatch the pilot episode which first introduces Livia. I am soon reminded, after only watching the opening credits, that I feel an immediate sense of familiarity with the New Jersey industrial and suburban landscape, the 'real' locations chosen by David Chase, which contribute to the series' claims to authenticity. My proximity to the text is enhanced, however, by the series' representation of an Italian-American working-class community's habitus. This experience, I feel, in spite of the series' obvious play with the tropes of the American gangster genre, eerily reflects remnants of my own past, which is articulated in the characters' distinctive eastern sea-board working-class accents and dialect, their choice of food, clothing and hairstyles.

This feeling first strikes me upon hearing Tony's unrefined speech and the defensiveness that surrounds his difficulty in articulating his feelings during his visit with Dr. Melfi. As Tony begins to recall the events of his working day, his violent, hyper-masculine side is slowly exposed through the use of flashbacks. This aspect of his gendered identity is clearly attached to

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events (therefore being subjected to accusations of 'misremembering, misrepresenting or simply lying' (Lawler 2002 : 249) should not take precedence over the autoethnographic narrative which strives to challenge such claims.

his role in the mafia, to which Tony appears loyal and committed. However, the context of the therapy reveals that this loyalty is not simply achieved via his own free will; the expectations of his family, and the history of their social class status has determined much of Tony's path, as the later focus of the series reveals. The first scenes from the Soprano home also introduce the stereotypical whining but tough mob wife Carmela, their two children, and visual markers of the Soprano family's upward mobility, which are displayed through signs of conspicuous consumption rather than understated bourgeois tastes. The large suburban house and swimming pool in a highly desirable middle-class neighbourhood, Carmela's later evening wear accentuated with padded shoulders, expensive gold jewellery, false finger nail extensions, and big hair style, are all conventions that tell a familiar mafia narrative. However, to assume that the text engages 'knowing' viewers exclusively at the level of critical distance or post-modern irony dismisses the possibility that popular texts can work 'at the level of fantasy' (Walkerdine 1990: 175). Like Walkerdine's account of viewing *Rocky II*, I feel *The Sopranos* is a text 'I can insert myself into, position myself with, the desires and pain woven into the images' (*ibid.*). If 'Rocky's struggle to become bourgeois' (*ibid.*) reminded Walkerdine of her own, then Tony and Carmela's aspirational desires for financial success and power in a bourgeois world, 'whatever way [they] can get it' (*ibid.*: 176) speak to me in a similar way.

It is the early sight of Livia, played by the late Nancy Marchand, however, that offers me an experience of punctum and mourning of the dead of the kind Barthes (1993 [1980]) describes through his encounter with the winter garden photograph of his mother. [100] From the moment Livia appears, I make the connection between her image and the memory of my grandmother Eva, often surrogate mother and significant matriarchal character in my own family narrative. While I would not describe my late grandmother as monstrous, she certainly held a comparable amount of powerful weight in my family history. Like many of the older women who surrounded my childhood, both women demand the attention of their adult sons, both speak with determined, what would seem to outsiders as exaggerated, eastern sea-board accents, and both are approximately the same age, and have similar facial features. It is the image of the slightly dishevelled, anxious Livia, wearing a mis-buttoned common 'housedress', the loose, easy-care polyester dress a woman of her generation wears when staying home for the day, that carries with it the weight of personal and cultural associations, thus promoting a search into the visual archives of other memories from my childhood. This is the dress I remember my grandmother wore most days in her middle and old age, as she performed her household chores or rested in front of the television in her worn leather reclining chair, like the one in Livia's house, a further signifier of the material furnishings of my working-class grandparents' generation. Upon hearing Livia's repeated question to Tony, 'You want some lunch? I got

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[100] This feeling is perhaps heightened by my present knowledge of the later extra-diegetic text surrounding Marchand's own death, which occurred after Season Two, on June 18, 2000. David Chase and writers however, decided to write Livia's death into the script in the second episode of Season Three.

eggplant,' memories are inspired of my grandmother's mannerisms and her cooking which often incorporated this standard Italian-American fare. It is finally Livia's resistance to Tony's suggestion that she move into what he calls a 'retirement community' that completes my sense that this fictional encounter represents for me a highly personal, 'located experience' of family and community (Livingstone 1999: 97). After spending her adult life married to an alcoholic husband, raising her two sons, and later working in a textiles factory in her middle and older age before losing much of her eyesight, I am reminded of my grandmother's own fears that she too, in her ill health, would be forgotten, left, as Livia's angry retort implies, in a nursing home with other elderly women 'babbling like idiots'.

Livia's untidy housedress seems to emphasise this aspect of Eva's difficult life while initiating more memory work outside this representation. My mother also dutifully wore the uniform housedress in the 1960s, however, my early memories of this are accessed only through the mediation of the family album, which offers endless possibilities for further connections. These cannot be fully expanded upon here, but can be indicated: the mother leaves the house out of financial necessity to take up work in the local factory. The grandmother looks after the two girls when she retires from work, or the elderly Italian woman next door, another housedress wearer who speaks no English, steps in to supply them with toast and milk in the mornings before they go to school. Later on, the mother spends less time at home in the 1970s and more time at night school as she sees the necessity to acquire her high-school equivalency diploma in order to enter a community college nursing school course. The father also attempts the high-school equivalency, but, unlike the mother, fails, adding some tension to the later familial narrative.[101]

4.4.1 Emotional homes

These reflections point to observations that most television drama taps into the familiar, as Robin Nelson (Nelson 1997: 43) notes with reference to Raymond Williams (1974), particularly in its dramatisation of interpersonal and family relationships. This fictionalising of the intimate provides viewers with the pleasures of recognition and a context for emotional identification as, in Nelson's words, 'Character and viewer seem to inhabit the same space' (Nelson 1997: 20). Our relationship to these fictions as larger 'imagined' audience communities (Anderson 1991) thus becomes a process of 'negotiation', where the space between the familiar of the domestic private sphere and the wider public sphere is continually reassessed.

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[101] This kind of memory connection which is made from one type of representation to another, Burgin (2004: 60) writes, as he refers to Barthes' (1993 [1980]) memory of an aunt, who wears a similar necklace to the one worn by a stranger in a 1926 van der Zee portrait, illustrates 'how the affect may not only be detached from the original representation but displaced onto other representations' (Burgin 2004: 61).

This negotiation is made more complex when we examine it next to the contemporary economic and technological conditions that facilitate 'changes in patterns of communication and physical mobility' (Morley 2001: 425). Morley emphasises that transnational patterns of communication necessitate a reconceptualisation of the notion of home, in which the physical, domestic space of television consumption comprises one home, while the symbolic home includes 'the local, national, or transnational communities in which people think of themselves as being 'at home'' (*ibid.*). My use of the term 'emotional homes' in the subtitle above reflects this emphasis which is extended by Harrington and Bielby (2005) in their coining of the phrase which is situated within their critique of three concepts in media studies: 'flow, home and pleasure'. The authors hence argue that Morley's 'spaces of belonging' and the notion of a 'symbolic home' suggests an emotional engagement, and can be considered within a discussion about the affective dimensions of television fandom which may offer a more productive means of theorising fan and cross-border fan pleasures (Harrington & Bielby 2005: 835). As an American viewing a US series that has travelled to another geographical context, my engagement with the text can be partly understood as one that supports assertions that popular TV genres such as the soap opera, drama series and serial drama, can induce powerful memories of a 'home' or a past that has been left behind.[102] *The Sopranos'* narrative therefore often symbolically moves me, at this point in my life, from the present space of my Bristol Victorian terrace, the place that provides material evidence of my sometimes uncertain social mobility into the middle-class, to which my earlier description alluded, back to the emotional safety of the familiar, a place close to what I used to call home, a small Italian-American working-class community. In doing so it facilitates a questioning of how I came to be that person of the past, and how I attempt to make sense of that identity in the present.

Sandvoss's (2005: 64) understanding of 'fandom as a form of *Heimat*' also indicates this type of intense emotional relationship fans can have with their object of fandom, which is often associated with notions of 'home', with its accompanying connotations of warmth and security. Fandom thus 'compares to the emotional significance of the places we have grown to call 'home', to the form of physical, emotional *and* ideological space that is best described as *Heimat*' (*ibid.*). As Sandvoss adds, however, '[t]he sense of home in fandom' is transformed into 'a mobile *Heimat*' as the 'spaces' of fandom are both physical and textual, 'and hence can

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[102] In a summary of recent empirical studies of Hispanic and Latino viewers of the telenovela who reside in the US, Harrington and Bielby (2005) note that, 'feelings of homesickness and nostalgia, heightened cultural consciousness, and identity-reaffirmation' are commonly shared viewing experiences (Harrington and Bielby 2005: 838, citing Barrera and Bielby (2001); (see also Carey 1988, cited in Harrington and Bielby 2005). Placing a different emphasis, although less explicitly, on the discourse of 'travel', Brunsdon (2000: 11) also notes that in her teaching of soap opera, it was the mainly working-class students who reported that *Coronation Street*'s theme tune 'would trigger memories of home and, quite often, feelings of homesickness'. The students' physical travel from home to university is invoked here, as well as their upwardly mobile travel from working-class to the middle-class experience of university life. In this context soap operas affirmed working-class as well as gendered status for female students, as they recalled memories of their mothers and past 'schooldays' (*ibid.*).

be accessed by fans in different mediated and unmediated ways, at different times, and from different localities' (*ibid.*).

While *The Sopranos'* narrative works in powerful ways to re-affirm some sense of an Italian-American working-class self, it also challenges the fantasies that accompany nostalgic notions of traditional community and stable identity by calling attention to my anxieties about existing in a space between working and middle-class identities. The series' representations of sexist, racist and homophobic rants, the othering that is also implied in *Heimat*,[103] which emerges from the confines of some communities (including fandoms, as this study will illustrate), can also generate great levels of discomfort. In this respect, the series feels too close to home, reminding me of my earlier desires for escape. My present middle-class habitus and the emotional, as well as physical journey which has led me to occupy this reflexive position of privilege, is specifically called upon through a further instance in the pilot episode. At one point during Tony's consultation with Dr. Melfi, the camera follows Tony's gaze to a close up of Melfi's medical qualification from Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts. I watch this with some fascination as Tufts is the same institution where I completed my undergraduate degree and I wonder if I had ever noticed this small, coincidental detail before.

As I rewatch this scene several times in one sitting I begin to understand that the tears shed for my deceased grandmother on the morning I recall above, may have also surfaced as a manifestation of multiple identifications and bereavements, including the longing for the support of a family who were thousands of miles away, and a sadness for my father who, like Tony, continues to find relationships and 'talk' difficult, and whose own education was stunted at the age of 15 because of his parents' expectations that he find work to help support their family. This scene's articulation of a tension between working-class and middle-class experience, as well as gender difference (it is the middle-class, educated female doctor who is placed in the superior position of knowledge to treat the undereducated, inarticulate Tony with medical intervention and 'talk' therapy) also triggers some identification with Dr. Melfi, which I may or may not have fully acknowledged upon first viewing. Melfi's struggles with guilt over her position as an upwardly mobile, middle-class Italian-American woman, a realisation which gradually evolves over the course of the series' later life, is close to my own guilt about being the first in my family, including extended family at the time, to obtain a university education, from a prestigious private American university at that. This degree and my ability to secure tuition scholarship funding, I am now reminded, as I interpret Tony's response to Melfi's qualifications as defensive and sarcastic (it is her 'world' of education and 'theory' that can not be reconciled with his 'real' world of lived experience), while admired yet not completely

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[103] Sandvoss (2005: 64-65) cites Morley's (2000) reference to Rathzel's (1994) study of German immigration and the problems of othering and social divisions. See Morley, D. (2000) *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Modernity*. Comedia, London: Routledge.; and Rathzel, N. (1994) 'Harmonious *Heimat* and disturbing Auslander', in K.K. Bhavani and A. Phoenix (eds), *Shifting Identities and Shifting Racism*. London: Sage.

understood by my mother, was never valued by my grandmother who always wondered why I did not simply 'settle down' and stay in 'place' within the community. Similarly, it was not taken seriously by my father, whose joke, upon the announcement of my acceptance to Tufts, took the form of a question, 'What kinda strings did ya pull to manage that one?'

My father's comment strongly echoes both Tony Soprano's own statement, boldly quoted in the Rucker (2000) text created for fans, 'You're born to this shit…You are what you are' (Chapter 2), as well as Kuhn's (1995: 89) mother's hardened words, 'You can't rise out of your class'. As much as the joke about my future infuriated me at the time, leaving me more determined to prove him and everyone else wrong, I now, like Kuhn, understand the context in which it was uttered and see the elements of its truth, which Morley (2001: 427) partly confirms in his sceptical critique of cultural studies' over celebration 'of all notions of mobility, fluidity, and hybridity'. Morley argues, for example, that while mobility, in particular the 'rapid mobility over long distances' has been equated with the postmodern experience, the 'paradigm still actually applies only to 1.6 percent of the world's population' (*ibid.*: 429). In spite of 'Hollywood's impact on the global imagination' (Warburton 1998 cited in Morley 2001: 429) Morley reminds readers of the impact of class as 'a major differentiating factor in respect to immobility' (Morley 2001: 429).

This reminder of the economic reality of why some groups may be more likely to 'stay at home' (Morley 2001: 429), however, leads me to consider the emotional consequences of the working-class longing 'to be somewhere and someone else' (Walkerdine 1990: 175). Walkerdine observes that in order for the viewing experience to be effective, popular films like *Rocky II* must 'necessitat[e] an already existent constitution of pains, of losses and desires for fulfilment and escape, inhabiting already a set of fantasy-spaces inscribing us in the 'everyday life' of practices which produce us all' (Walkerdine 1990: 176). What I have described above suggests some evidence of moments in which the fantasy-space of the text and viewer are more directly linked for me, and although their discursive meanings do not exist in isolation to the rest of the narrative, and in fact are more poignant when considered in relation to other scenes and later episodes and seasons, they stop me in my viewing and halt my attention. My comparison between the scene above and experience is complex and intersects with memories of what I imagine to have been my father's own previous fantasies of mobility and escape, his desire to return to the freedom of his youth before marrying at the age of nineteen and suffering the further financial burdens of working-class life with two children.

The other level of pain I have to acknowledge is to do with my own strong identification with what I have imagined were my father's desires for escape. Freedom from working-class constrictions and the traditional gendered roles that dominated the community in which I was raised was an aim that totally consumed my young adult life during the late 1970s and 1980s, leaving it unsurprising that the television and popular films with which I have held strong

attachments, all seem to have in common, largely white, working-class escapist narratives.[104] My attachment to *The Sopranos* has been no exception. However, its difference lies in the fact that the series arrived at a particular point, a 'periodicity of identity', when I believed I had left behind the pains that accompanied those desires.

4.5 MAKING CONNECTIONS

The aim of this 'memory work' autoethnography has been to introduce the analytical value of the personal narrative in the fan-ethnographic account. As Kuhn (1995: 38) writes, in one respect, the 'detour' into memory can be healing, allowing the voice of the past subject to speak to and then through, the subject of the present. While such forms of memory work may also be privately experienced or articulated by wider audiences or fans of popular cultural texts, the discursive context within which this memory work is produced, which draws attention to the scholar's personal 'healing', in spite of its connections to wider cultural processes that inform identity construction, can be accused of falling short of meeting the goals of social research endeavours. The use of autoethnography in the context of empirical audience research, therefore must be constantly justified, as a means of confronting charges of solipsism and sentimentalism. In this respect, a strong argument for autoethnography is that it 'teaches' (*ibid.*), as it challenges social science research practices that often attempt to separate the 'detached' intellectual realm of the 'objective', from the highly emotional realm of the 'subjective', which is silenced or rationalised in empirical work (see Walkerdine 1990). While recent fan studies scholarship (Harrington & Bielby 1995; 2005; Hills 2002) has attempted to challenge this separation of the objective and the subjective by appropriating object-relations theory for the study of fandom, autoethnographic practices problematise these binary oppositions by prompting a critical questioning of how the researcher's 'subjective' self and their discursive investments may intrude upon empirical research in unexpected ways. As my narrative has strongly suggested, my attachments to *The Sopranos* and my later choice to pursue an academic study of its Internet fandom, was laden with a complex emotional history. Much of this emotional baggage was then nurtured from the early days of my pre-PhD participation in US dominated fansites. Engaging

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[104] For many years I was a young teenage fan of the US soap opera *General Hospital*. While most of the past storylines have now faded from my memory, it was the long-running romance that centred around the characters Luke and Laura, which seems to define my relationship to serial. Luke was the rough, working-class boy from the 'wrong' side of town and Laura, by contrast, was the daughter of a wealthy businessman who was forbidden to love Luke. The couple's lengthy trials and tribulations were the source of many pleasures for me. In fantasy I imagined my life as the rich Laura whose family money would never leave her in need. At the same time I criticised her bourgeois lifestyle, saw her at times as a spoiled brat, not deserving the more genuine and hard done by Luke. The 1977 popular film *Saturday Night Fever,* with its emphasis on Italian-American ethnicity and class difference, accentuated through the main character's growing relationship with a young woman whose middle-class aspirations fuel his own desires, also spoke to me about my own dreams of upward mobility and subsequently formed the basis of what became a long-term, although private, fan interest in the actor John Travolta. Other popular film examples such as *Educating Rita* also hold a special place within my periodicity of viewing identity.

with other fans from the US through the medium of the Internet seemed, in many ways, to complete the sense that I had found the 'emotional home' for which part of me had longed, however, this inevitably complicated the later research and in some instances directly informed my 'scholarly' encounters with fan-respondents.

It may be most theoretically productive to extend a consideration of some of the concerns that my narrative introduces by explicitly addressing the researcher's relationship to his/her collected audience data. While Chapters 6 and 7 offer further relevant examples, the discussion below attempts to provide a framework for some introductory material which situates my narrative in relation to the voices of others.

While I would not want to make the contentious assertion that the reflexive narrative of my relationship to *The Sopranos*, which is heavily invested in discourses of class, family, ethnicity, gender and age, equals the diversity of meanings made by other *Sopranos* fans, it would be fair to argue that my account supports Sandvoss's (2005: 102) proposition that the fan object functions 'as textual extension of the self', thus blurring the boundaries between fan object and the self. In this sense, Sandvoss's conceptualisation of fandom challenges Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) Spectacle/Performance Paradigm, as discussed in Chapter 1, which links narcissistic self-reflection specifically to public performance and its reliance on an audience, real or imagined. For Sandvoss, fandom should also be conceived 'as a form of narcissistic self-reflection not between fans and their social environment but between the fan and his or her object of fandom' (2005: 98).[105] This 'second form of narcissism' can thus be applied to fans who may hesitate to 'publicly acknowledge their fandom' or who may not participate within fandoms social networks (*ibid.*).[106] As Sandvoss writes, 'the first and foremost audience for the performance of fans is the fan him- or herself' (2005: 98).

The possibility that some *Sopranos* fans may hesitate, for example, to share with others their emotive personalisations of the text, was identified at different points throughout this study. As some of my discussion in Chapter 6 asserts, close personalisation of *The Sopranos* in the context of forum interaction may be actively discouraged in favour of more impersonal, critical discourse. This might explain, at least to some degree, why three female *Sopranos'* fans,[107] with whom I had more private electronic correspondence, disclosed their strong feelings about the character Livia outside of public forum threads. In one instance, when most Sopranoland Forum members left the chat room after discussing the seventh episode of Season Five, 'In Camelot',

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[105] Sandvoss's model draws on McLuhan's (1964) 'conceptualization of the media as an extension of the self' (Sandvoss 2005: 98) and his reading of the Narcissus myth. McLuhan emphasises Narcissis's fascination with his reflection, and his seeming unawareness that he is looking at his reflection. McLuhan makes an analogy between this and the 'consumption of electronic media' (Sandvoss 2005: 99). Mass media thus 'extend ourselves in time and space' (*ibid.*).

[106] See for example Cherry, B. (2002) Screaming for release: femininity and horror film fandom in Britain', in S. Chibnall and J. Petley (eds), *British Horror Cinema*. London: Routledge.

[107] As I explain in Chapter 5, I have followed ethical research guidelines and removed all respondents' user names, and/or offline names. I have also presented the correspondences in their original form.

which many fans claimed was 'boring', one female fan wrote, 'I cried during the flash back because I realized that Livia is almost like my Grandmother' (April 18, 2004).[108] Another female fan also added, 'She's just like my Mom, kind of hard to watch sometimes... I think if my mom could have she would have put a hit out on me. LOL' (April 18, 2004). Although the former member quickly left the room without qualifying her statement, the latter noted that the difficult relationship with her 'controlling' mother, who, like her grandmother, regularly publicly humiliated her, had deteriorated to the point where they were no longer on speaking terms. The power of the representation of the difficult character Livia to facilitate fan comparisons to their own mothers and grandmothers and the dynamics of their complex family relationships, was recognised much earlier in an email written by another female respondent who wrote, 'Livia was a tribute to my still living Grandmother'. She added,

> It was almost painful to watch, because it was so dead on accurate to what I had to go through in real life. The writers on the Soprano's are amazingly true to life. The relationships are extremely accurate, and I think that is what is the draw. Soap operas tend to be sensational, and The Sopranos is well grounded. (August 5, 2002)

It is important to acknowledge here that my early encounter with this response may have illustrated my own personal difficulty in dealing with this sensitive subject matter. Rather than follow up with careful questioning about why Livia's character could introduce such pain in watching, I responded with a reductive and nostalgic comparison between Livia and my own grandmother, as an attempt to share some kind of common ground with this fan. I then quickly proceeded to ask about her 'bad experience' in another *Sopranos* newsgroup. On one level, it appears I may have shied away from asking this fan more about her emotional viewing experience of Livia because I was not quite sure how I would respond to the potential enormity of what she 'had to go through in real life'. On another level, my reluctance may have functioned as a form of defense, as her testimony might have triggered my own conflicting and painful memories of family.

My 'defensive' strategy in this research encounter, and at various other points during the research, illustrates Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) view that the researcher, like the researched, is also an 'anxious' and 'defended subject', and that such a position is likely to intrude upon the production and analysis of data. Walkerdine *et al.* (2002) also suggest that research encounters such as the above example, illustrate how psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, countertransference, detachment, identifications and fantasies do not disappear in the research process but can create contradictions between multiple subject positions. To a large degree, this example illustrates the difficulty and discomfort the researcher experiences when they are at risk of losing their 'detached' researcher's identity (*ibid.*: 193). In this case, as I have

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[108] The gradual exit of members left three participants chatting; two female fans who joined in on a regular basis, and myself.

suggested, my ' "countertransference" or projection of concerns onto the ethnographic Other' (Hills 2005a: 808) is evidenced through my intellectual 'desire to reveal' some kind of truth about fan experience in the 'newsgroup', which is, at the same time, very likely 'counterpointed by the desire to conceal' (Walkerdine *et al.* 2002: 184). Such concealment therefore has the capacity to suppress respondents' stories, reminding us 'that the research story told is constructed…rather than being a neutral account of pre-existing reality' (Hollway & Jefferson 2000: 29-30).

Such strong identifications with the narratives and discourses articulated through fan objects can illustrate the different ways in which the object of fandom forms 'part of the fan's (sense of) self' rather than reducing the engagement to the notion of 'a textual possession', which still implies a clear separation of fan and text (Sandvoss 2005: 101). In my account, *The Sopranos* speaks about and extends 'aspects of the self in the form of drives and fantasies' (*ibid.*). Other fan accounts which reveal an intense emotional identification and personalisation of the text, also show how the text can 'be experienced as part of the fan's fabric of the self' (*ibid.*), as the above respondent's commentary suggests, reflecting the fan's own life struggles, values or repertoire of discursive investments. The tendency for some fans to draw distinct parallels between themselves and the fiction, thus inserting themselves into the narrative, indicates the ways in which fans' relationship to their object of fandom may be 'structured through their own beliefs' (*ibid.*: 104). As Sandvoss writes,

> Beyond identificatory fantasies of resembling or imitating (Stacey 1994), the key indication of fans' self-reflective reading of their object of fandom then lies in the way in which they superimpose attributes of themselves, their beliefs and value systems and, ultimately, their sense of self on the object of fandom. (Sandvoss 2005: 104)

Consider, for example, the email correspondence extract below in which one young male fan offers an illustration of his self-reflective interpretation of *The Sopranos,* which he is not willing to reveal in the public space of a fan discussion forum:

> I am an 18-year-old British male living in the Midlands. This is hard to explain, usually I'm pretty articulate, but when it comes to the written word, I'm blank. Basically, I believe that there are two faces to everybody, there's the face you show yourself, and the way you behave with only your knowledge. The hidden face, my hidden face is an area of myself I do not reveal to strangers, but in this case, finding someone who wants to know for a greater cause and not just for gossip, is the reason why I have decided to speak. I often commit crimes seen on the show, I deal, I steal and I do "other jobs", but like I said, none as bad as those on the show, what I do, are things where no one gets hurt and business is done. When I watch "The Sopranos" the values I live by and values I like are what attract me to the show.
>
> (December 2, 2002)

Like many of the *Star Wars* fans who claimed that the films reflected their religious and spiritual beliefs (Brooker 2002: 5-6, cited in Sandvoss 2005: 104), or the *Cagney and Lacey* fans who claimed close affinity with the two strong female characters and their friendship (see D'Acci 1994; and Brower 1992: 169), many *Sopranos* fans publicly announce their investments with the text's nostalgic discourses of Italian-American heritage, family, tradition and loyalty, as the following examples indicate:

> I can so relate to this family. When I wear my Soprano shirt people will stop and say, "Oh The Sopranos, Don;t you love that show?" and I'll say, "We are The Sopranos!" People look at me like I'm crazy. I'm just glad to know that my family is not off the wall. (November 22, 2000)

> The show is very realistic. I was raised in a very Italian family; and the scenes with all the men doing their "clubbing" and "meetings" are very authentic. I see my family in every scene. There's not enough of that kind of Italian kinship nowadays, except in certain locations like Philadelphia, New Jersey, Stubenville, OH, etc etc. I know this generation has so many ethnic mixed marriages that the true Italian family is becoming more and more extinct.... (March 30, 2001)

> I can totally relate to the show! Just like the writer lived with me there are so many memories brought back to me! The food yummy (peppersaneggs) We live to eat! I love the warmth ya can feel it. That's Italian. (June 1, 2001) [109]

Strong fan emotional ties to 'places' represented in the 'virtual space' of the fan object introduce further questions which are addressed in Sandvoss's discussion of the 'places of fandom' (2005: 53). An understanding of these places has further implications for the conceptualisation of fandom as providing an 'emotional home' and for the construction of fan identities through consumption practices. These questions will be considered in Chapter 7.

4.6 SUMMARY

My focus on self-reflexivity, and more specifically on the autoethnographic genre of writing, has drawn attention to the ethical challenges of conducting social research. Couldry (1996: 318) has argued that the problems of studying and attempting to speak for 'others' are not only delegated to traditional ethnographies and their association with 'colonial projects'; they 'become *more*, not less acute when one applies ethnographic methods to the study of one's own society' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). The questions prompted by this study confirm this assertion. Drawing on relevant literature and previous examples in fan studies, I have argued that self-reflexive practices are not unproblematic. Utilising memory work as a form of autoethnography, I have attempted to situate the personal within the ethnography and have argued that this approach is useful in making wider connections to the cultural processes that

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[109] All of these examples were posted on GIST TV Fan Clubs; 'La Famiglia – The Sopranos FanClub': http://clubs.gist.com/tvclubs/fanclubhost.jsp?boardId=23&topicId=735&fanclub=sopranos. Accessed on November 8, 2001.

inform cultural identity and cultural activity, including patterns of consumption as well as academic discourse. In the latter part of the chapter I made explicit connections between the personal and collected research 'data', by introducing ways in which the analyst's personal investments may shape the direction of empirical research, while also considering the relevance of Sandvoss's work with respect to ways in which fan objects function as extensions of the fan self. This discussion has thus set the tone for a healthy, sceptical reading of the 'objective' qualitative research strategies that were used to collect data for this thesis. Chapter 5 will thus present a further shift in focus by tracing the path I have taken in my approach to fieldwork, data collection and sampling of material, which my analytical discussion approaches in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 5: Data collection and methods for analysis

5.0 INTRODUCTION: INVESTIGATING SOPRANOLAND FORUM AND YAHOO! SOPRANOSFORUM

In this chapter I discuss the rationale that underpins my chosen fieldwork design while also describing the range of research methods I used to collect and organise data, which focussed on two *Sopranos* online forums. The latter part of the chapter will then present a more lengthy discussion of the various layers of data 'results'. The presentation of quantitative results is supported with several charts and a table throughout the body of the text. Further materials, such as private correspondences, questions sent to respondents, and a *Sopranos* episode synopsis, are provided in the Appendices as noted. Chapters 6 and 7 will offer a more detailed analytical discussion.

5.1 OVERVIEW

The methodological choices I outline below loosely reflect the principles of 'Grounded Theory' as described by Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin 1990).[110] With its emphasis on building theory and not just testing it, Grounded Theory allows the analyst to break through the biases that are brought to research assumptions (*ibid.*: 57). As Titscher *et al.*(2000: 85) assert, however, Grounded Theory 'is less a matter of specific method of analysis than an approach to the development of (text-based) concepts and theories (of small or middle range). It is therefore a question of a research strategy'. Ethnographic research methods also reflect such a 'strategy' and can be recognised in Hine's (2000: 71) 'virtual ethnography' which evolved out of a similar 'exploratory process, with each activity and each new form of data leading to another and further adding to the understanding of what ethnography could mean in this kind of context'. Considering the conditions of the Internet as a research site, the decisions I have made throughout the course of this project similarly reflect a commitment to addressing a set of research questions which have been deliberately constructed with this openness and flexibility in mind (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 26). Ethnographic text analysis, as Tischer *et al.* (2000: 93-94) note, drawing on Hammersley & Atkinson (1995), also borrows its methods directly from Grounded Theory. With its emphasis on developing analytical categories in order to understand phenomena, collected texts are coded, re-read, and recoded if necessary when new categories arise. 'The aim of the data analysis is first to develop a stable set of categories, and then to code the whole of the data using these categories' (Titscher *et al.*, 2000: 94). A set of categories are then analysed and explored in relationship to each other. The methods used for coding my collected data reflect this approach and will be discussed in more detail below.

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[110] Originally proposed in Glaser B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

However flexible my fieldwork approach has been, it is important to note that my reading of relevant literature in the fields of audience, qualitative research, and Internet studies has always coincided with this activity.[111] In this respect, qualitative research can aim to make meaningful connections between abstract theories and the social processes of lived experience. My justification for a more 'objective' approach to data collection and analysis, which involves the processes of fragmentation, abstraction and generalisation, therefore supports the argument that ethnographic research can be effective when presented as a 'layered' or balanced narrative. Accounts that embrace the subjective, emotional, narrative, and fantasy, such as those I constructed in Chapter 4, can be analysed with equal emphasis alongside statistical empirical material (cf. Lerum 2001). Quantitative methods of sampling and counting have been criticised because of their association with positivism, which aims to 'test' hypotheses through the correlation of variables, rather than 'generating' hypotheses by attending to 'the social and cultural construction of the 'variables' which they seek to correlate' (Silverman 1993: 144). Silverman adds, however, that the two previously distinct disciplines of positivism and interpretative social science need not exist in opposition to each other. Depending on the nature of the research context and complexity of questions involved, a combination of both approaches is now common practice and can strengthen many 'ethnographic' studies (*ibid.*: 22; see also Strauss & Corbin 1990: Introduction). Considering the potential for the vast amount of data collection one can obtain from Internet sources, quantitative methods can often offer a useful means of entry into empirical material for qualitative analysis.

5.2 COMBINING ETHNOGRAPHY WITH DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACHES

Comparisons made between Internet newsgroup interaction and informal spoken conversation or 'chat', have made newsgroups attractive sites for ethnographic study. Titscher *et al.* (2000: 99) note that ethnographic approaches differ from hermeneutic methods because they are 'fully object-oriented: the material, rather than the interpretative power of the investigators, is of central importance'. Whereas earlier ethnographic practices tended to approach speech in interaction as authentic representations of truth, hence contributing to ethnography's 'romantic legacy' (Hine 2000: 51, citing Hammersley & Atkinson 1995), Sterne (1999: 269) observes the more common 'hybrid approach' for the analysis of online cultural phenomena which combines ethnographic approaches with discourse analysis. This move supports Hine's methodological position, noted in the following passage, which calls for a coexistence of the two areas:

> A textual focus places emphasis on the ways in which contributions are justified and rendered authoritative, and on the identities which authors

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[111] Consider, for example, Kelle's (Titscher *et al.* 2000: 81, citing Kelle 1994: 333) observation of the Grounded Theory debate, which notes Glaser's requirement that fieldwork should be approached from a position of no prior knowledge of scientific literature. In contrast, Strauss & Corbin 'permit – even recommend – intensive study of the relevant literature before the empirical work begins'.

> construct and perform through their postings. This approach to ethnography suggests a discourse analytic stance, which remains ambivalent about the nature of the discourse which is under analysis. (Hine 2000: 53)

I expected that my methods for data collection would offer the opportunity to explore individual and collective identity constructions through the local practices of a relatively small proportion of what, in fact, constitutes a wide and diverse *Sopranos* online fan community. This study therefore does not make claims to represent the whole 'truth' of this membership. Nor does it assume that the empirical evidence put forward through a selection of spontaneous asynchronous electronic messages or synchronous chats,[112] portrays the ultimate 'truth' of its individual speakers. The principles underlying discourse analysis promote a useful scepticism towards such assumptions about the transparency of language. As Silverman (1993: 120) writes, discourse analysis, as a wide and diverse social science discipline, draws on the concerns of J.L. Austin's (1962) work, which I discussed earlier in Chapter 1 in relation to Butler's ideas surrounding performance and performativity. The aims of discourse analysis hence support Austin's position that speakers' performative utterances 'do not describe their state of mind' or 'picture reality', but instead 'perform some action' (Silverman 1993: 120). I will not rehearse here my discussion of the influence of Butler's appropriation of the performative in poststructuralist theories of identity or detail Hills's (2002) argument for 'performative consumption' which extends and problematises Butler. I will, however, emphasise that my discursive approach to the study of meaning made through computer-mediated fan interaction in local contexts supports my in-depth analyses in Chapters 6 and 7, which takes into account the complexity of both of these positions. With respect to the issue of attending to 'absences' in language, (a point Fairclough signals [1995: 5]) Hills's (2002) contribution is particularly relevant and will be examined in more detail in the concluding chapter next to his appropriation of D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic object-relations theory.

5.3 CHOICE OF FIELDWORK SITES

My participation as active poster in multiple *Sopranos* fan sites in the early stages of the project allowed me to explore a range of possible research approaches and strategies as I experienced fan activity in diverse online social spaces. The sites in which I regularly participated included: the Sopranoland.com message boards,[113] GIST: Sopranos forum (now discontinued), Yahoo! groups – Sopranosintheuk[114], Yahoo! groups – Sopranos,[115] Yahoo! groups –

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[112] The term asynchronous refers to communication (regular offline mail or electronic mail) in which the persons involved in the interaction need not be present at the same time. Synchronous communication, on the other hand, refers to forms of communication that rely on the simultaneous presence of those involved, as in face-to-face communication, phone conversation, or real-time chats.
[113] See www.Sopranoland.com. Accessed on April 18, 2006. As I will note, the first Sopranoland message board in which I participated was discontinued, and re-created in the 'ezboard' message board network.
[114] See www.geocities.com/sopranosintheuk. Accessed on June 17, 2004.
[115] See http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/sopranos/. Accessed on April 18, 2006.

SopranosForum,[116] and *The Sopranos* forum in the 'Television Without Pity' website.[117] I made the decision to narrow down my field of study to two US based online *Sopranos'* discussion forums: the Sopranoland Forum[118] and Yahoo! groups - SopranosForum[119] (from this point on, Yahoo! SopranosForum). The following section summarises how I arrived at the sites and considers their relevance to my research questions.

5.3.1 Sopranoland Forum

Sopranoland Forum is the message board for the highly visible[120] *Sopranos* fan created website Sopranoland.com. I became familiar with this site in 1999 when conducting a Google search for 'The Sopranos' before I registered for PhD study in 2002. Sopranoland was listed immediately after the show's official HBO website and seemed a useful webpage from which to begin my fan participation and conduct my later virtual fieldwork. This large and popular fansite was created early during Season One in 1999 by 'Poizen Ivy' (Ivy Shantelle Hover), a *Sopranos* fan and Web page designer who claims Sopranoland is a 'one woman show'. Like many unofficial websites, Sopranoland.com provides episode guides written by the webmistress, links to related articles, other fan-sites, episode close caption transcripts, and links to related commercial sites. Although Sopranoland has not always identified itself as a commercial site, it offers promotional services for interested advertisers at a cost to assist in running the site, while also marketing its own 'Sopranoland mall' branded commodities (badges, stickers, T-Shirts, DVDs, books, desktop wallpaper, etc.). On April 29, 2003, the site noted the following 'approximate' subscriber demographics: membership numbers over 6,400; 50/50% male/female ratio, 80% aged 18-49; dominant age ranges between 30-39; 25% reside in New Jersey and New York; 25% reside outside of the US, leaving the remaining percentage, upon assumption, US residents.

With the rapid growth of its message board activity during my early participation in the forum in 2000, it became clear that the boards were largely unmoderated by the webmistress, therefore allowing any member to post whatever they liked. In 2003, after a series of ongoing flame-wars that provoked many complaints from members, 'Ivy' became more active and removed the existing message board from the Web. A new forum was then established in the more

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[116] See http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/SOPRANOSFORUM/. Accessed on July 28, 2007.
[117] See www.televisionwithoutpity.com/. Accessed on April 18, 2006.

[118] Sopranoland Forum is part of the 'www.ezboard' community. See http://p196.ezboard.com/bsopranolandforum. Accessed on April 18, 2006.
[119] According to Usenet.com, Yahoo! newsgroups are 'slightly' different from Usenet newsgroups as they are only accessed through Yahoo's homepage and not through the Usenet network. In addition, Usenet.com writes, they are 'text groups', not binary groups and thus 'only contain text messages and you cannot download binaries or files from them.' See http://www.usenet.com/articles/yahoo_newsgroup.htm. Accessed on April 18, 2006.
[120] Sopranoland.com notes that according to Alexa.com, the site consistently ranks as one of the most popular *Sopranos* websites on the Internet. (Accessed on April 18, 2006.) The site has received extensive media coverage in radio and newspaper reviews, as well as in television interviews with the webmistress. In a very recent *Guardian* (Pilkington 2007: 28) report, which observes the growing anticipation in the US around *The Sopranos'* final episode, Ed Pilkington refers to Sopranoland.com as 'one of the biggest fan websites' and proceeds to cite the webmistress's speculation.

technically efficient ezboard message board network, a provider that allows members to participate across ezboard online communities under one user name/identity. [121] Many members also agreed to join the newly available chat room facility every Sunday evening after viewing Season Five episodes.[122] This technological advantage provided an additional rich resource to gather naturally occurring data from synchronous, or spontaneous computer-mediated interaction.

The refinement of my third research question, which considers how the organisation of Internet communication settings may influence identity performance and community practice (see Hine 2000: 83), was informed by my knowledge of this group's structural difficulties and transformations. In order to realise the potential for exploring this question it was necessary to choose another site for investigation.

5.3.2 Yahoo! SopranosForum

I discovered the Yahoo! SopranosForum through a similar search for *Sopranos*-related material in 2002. I registered with this group in April 2003, therefore my knowledge of its history was minimal compared to my experience of Sopranoland's message boards. During this time the listed membership numbers were over 1,800. The forum was established in 2001 by a US based *Sopranos* fan. As a non-commercial Yahoo! newsgroup, the group differed significantly from the larger Sopranoland Forum in a number of ways and it was primarily this difference that attracted me to the site as an object of study. Next to Sopranoland, the Yahoo! SopranosForum allowed me to ask further questions about how its features might constrain social relations within a distinctive performative space (Hine 2000). Its technical resources seemed to offer users a distinctive interactive experience and its active membership during the time of this study was considerably lower than Sopranoland. As a result I initially sensed that members were more familiar and intimate with each other. The newsgroup's postings had also been closely moderated by the site's creator and key moderator (often referred to as the 'Capo'), whose home webpage link provided prospective members with clear guidance for expected newsgroup behaviour.[123] A chat facility was also available in the Yahoo! site, however, after many attempts to initiate chats, I managed to chat online only once with two members. In addition, unlike Sopranoland Forum's chat room, the Yahoo! site's chat facility made it difficult for me to

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[121] The developments in the forum after the time of the fieldwork, resulted in the movement of all discussions for Season Six to a new website's forum 'The Chase Lounge', which was created by a prominent moderator of the Sopranoland community. As noted in Chapter 1, footnote 41, see http://www.thechaselounge.net/. Accessed on June 28, 2007.

[122] I initially facilitated use of the chat room in the early part of the season as another method for the research. In doing so, I regularly posted reminders to the group on the day before the episode broadcast. After a few weeks members did not need much prompting and visitor numbers to the room continued to grow, with many regulars returning every week.

[123] Hine (2000: 160) offers a useful definition for the 'moderated newsgroup': 'A newsgroup in which one member, the moderator, checks all messages posted for relevance and acceptability before adding them to the newsgroup. Messages can only be posted via the moderator'. This was certainly the case in this Yahoo! group. See the 'SopranosForum' webpage: http://www.sopranosforum.com/. Accessed on April 23, 2006.

download the chat, obliging me to rely on memory and quick note taking.[124] This example calls attention to the kinds of choices the virtual ethnographer must make over the course of research. I have therefore had to embrace what Hine (2000: 154) calls an 'adaptive approach to ethnography'. Hine writes that an adaptive approach allows the ethnography 'to thrive in the conditions which developments in mediated communication offer' (*ibid.*). This necessary approach resulted in some methodological omissions, which highlight the partiality of this ethnographic account. I will discuss this further below.

5.4 COLLECTION METHODS AND DATA MANAGEMENT

My precise period of virtual fieldwork in these two sites took place over a 14-week period. Episode 1 ('The Two Tonys') of the show's fifth season, broadcast in the US on Sunday night, March 7, 2004, marked the beginning of 'Week 1' fieldwork. 'Week 14' ended 7 days after the broadcast of the season finale, Episode 13, ('All Due Respect'), June 13, 2004. Season Five was a 13-episode season, however, the US Memorial Day holiday fell on Sunday, June 6, 2004, the week after Episode 12. The cable producers, HBO, made the decision to postpone the final episode until the following week. This meant that the fieldwork was extended to a 14-week period, with an extra posting week in between Episodes 12 and 13.

Each week I downloaded and saved posts in both forums and organised them according to the time and dates detailed next to each post. The episodes were broadcast in the US every Sunday night from 9 to 10pm, Eastern Standard Time. As these two forums are comprised largely of a US fan base, many members posted soon after the first US broadcast. I realised, however, considering the time difference between various states throughout the country, in addition to various times of reception in other parts of the world, that in order accurately to calculate the number of posts received each week, I needed to decide on a clear 'threshold' hour which marked the time of the first and last post for a chosen week. I chose the hour of 8pm each Sunday night, my UK time, to record the first post for a given week as I observed that the first posts after each episode were arriving in the forums shortly after this hour. On some occasions a first post arrived shortly before 8pm, however in most cases they arrived after.

In order to organise the large volume of material as well as gain some basic understanding of which topics fans prioritised in each forum, I created a level of categorisation that I have termed 'Level 1' or 'Primary Organisation Level'. This level is comprised of four units and assisted in the organisation, sorting, categorisation, and mainly 'storage' of posts. I then created a further 'Level 2' or 'Analytical Level' of categorisation. This conceptual level, which I will discuss further in section 5.9, along with how it informs my coding procedures, contains three main categories or analytical concepts that directly reflect the concerns of my research questions.

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[124] The moderator suggested conducting chats through a main chat room in Yahoo! Messenger which would have allowed easy participation and downloading access. However, as members increasingly showed no interest in meeting for chats, the idea was never followed through to fruition.

5.4.1 'Level 1' categories

The following list provides a detailed breakdown of the 'Level 1' categories:

1) Sopranos Details: Posts that fall under Spoilers, Characters, Future Speculations, Present Episode Discussion, The Goods, Music, Ask a Question, Season Specific Episode discussions

2) Extratextual: The Cast and News, Literature and Media, Mob Films, TV Shows, Directors and Actors

3) Fandom: Fan Trivia Quizes, 'How many times have you rewatched Season One?', 'You know you're a fan when…', etc.

4) Internet Usage: Posts such as 'Netiquette' and 'Off Topic' (totally unrelated to the series) or Net related content.

5.5 ORGANISATION OF 'LEVEL 1' CATEGORIES AND CALCULATION OF POSTS

At the end of each week I downloaded files, categorised, stored and calculated messages by their type in a similar fashion to that implemented by Nancy Baym (2000) [125]. In my case I used the four Level 1 categories primarily as an overarching 'organising' framework. For example, as Baym notes, newsgroups such as the Yahoo! SopranosForum and the ezboard Sopranoland Forum usually adhere to norms of netiquette by designating their posts by subject for easy recognition to allow users the choice to read some posts and skip others. Some discussion topics such as 'Off-topic', 'Spoilers', or 'Episode Five Discussion', are often clearly labelled and were thus easily categorised as such. There is, however, often a looseness in many Yahoo! SopranosForum posters' responses, resulting in subsequent responses that do not neatly fit into a tight frame of topic reference.[126] I have mainly categorised Yahoo! SopranosForum posts according to cues found in the subject titles. If titles were noticeably more ambiguous with no clear topic demarcation (such as 'Just a thought about something…') I attempted to categorise it according to the dominant theme of the post, while recognising that other aspects of the message contents could overlap into diverging topic concerns.

Unlike a Yahoo! 'list' of chronologically organised posts, Sopranoland Forum, like many other web-based message boards, provides the user with a variety of main topic threads. The user may easily read and respond to topic threads and they can also add more 'sub-topics' to existing threads. This freedom resulted in several pages of newly created topics under a main topic

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[125] Baym's interest in the categorisation of genres is largely informed by the surveys that r.a.t.s.' (rec.arts.tv.soaps) participants completed. She notes that 'few of the genres mentioned in surveys are explicitly labeled in subject lines' (2000: 28). This cross analysis leads her to question 'why some genres need to be labeled and others do not' (*ibid.*). Baym compares explicitly labelled genres with those that are not, thus developing a thesis 'about the particular dimensions of concern that shape the categorizations and marking of genre' (*ibid.*). This method is admirable, methodologically rigorous, and certainly in line with Baym's wider concerns. My simplified appropriation serves the basic purpose of assisting in the organisation and calculation of posts and hence reflects the different emphasis of this project.

[126] Baym (2000: 222) has also noted she recognised that responses to posts in her sample did not always fall within the same 'genre' as the original post.

thread, many of which might have contained a further several pages of responses. These posts were also in danger of repeating other fans' topics if the poster had not read through the entire thread or message board. This became problematic as the message boards grew increasingly more repetitive and disorganised. It was this aspect of posting activity that made accurate 'weekly' collection and organisation (as opposed to 'thematic' collection) a laborious process, as I had to check through every thread and its hierarchical family in the site at the end of every week for my calculations. When I did locate new posts they may have been responses to previous posts that were dated back more than a month. This phenomenon would not occur in a Yahoo! newsgroup list as it is seen as bad netiquette not to reply within a reasonable amount of time to a posted topic. The clear organisation of main topic threads in the site, however, served a useful purpose when making decisions about the creation of the Level 1 categories. I thus downloaded posts by their topic title and assigned them according to the categories the site itself created.

5.6 SAMPLING OF POSTS

With an overall total of 11,977 posts from both sites in the course of 14 weeks it became necessary to develop a practical method that would allow me to manage this huge volume of material for further meaningful analysis. My final decision was to sample the heaviest posting Week 12 from Sopranoland Forum and the same Week 12 postings from Yahoo! SopranosForum. I saw the opportunity for sampling Week 12 as promising, as the episodic and time frame focus would enable me to establish which topic subjects or range of themes dominated posting activity and which areas were marginalised during the two weeks prior to the Season Five finale (see Appendix 3 for 'Long Term Parking' episode synopsis). I intended this selection would function primarily as an initial, non-biased entry into the data and would allow me to identify recurring or contrasting themes across the two sites through further coding analysis. The episodic and fixed temporal concentration on a corpus of messages, however, opens up this aspect of the research methodology to charges of partiality or not retaining coherence. A focus on later Week 12 forum activities, however, also called attention to issues that arose in earlier weeks in both groups. My observations and conclusions, therefore, remain sensitive to the diversity of my long-term participant observations from the early days of this project to the end of the fieldwork. In addition to the sample, I also consider, where relevant, records and diary notes, a corpus of weekly online chats in Sopranoland Forum and email correspondences with fans from both fieldwork sites.

5.7 MULTIPLE DATA GATHERING METHODS: ETHICS, POSSIBILITIES, DIFFICULTIES AND OMISSIONS

Combining various theoretical approaches in social research calls attention to the question of collecting multiple forms of data. 'Multimodal gathering techniques' (Taylor 1999: 444) have

been useful for some Internet based research that is specifically concerned with making connections between online and offline experiences. Sherry Turkle (Turkle 1995: 324, cited in Taylor 1999: 437), for example, made the decision not to report her online findings unless she met with informants in the context of face-to-face interactions. Methodological strategies are therefore largely determined by the nature of the questions and underpinning theoretical perspectives involved. Like Taylor (1999: 437), I am concerned with the investigation of online fan activity and online fan identity performance as 'a thing in itself'. Previous literature on offline fandoms is therefore important but does not account for the ways in which the specific spatial and temporal orderings of the Internet shape identity formation and fan community practices. In this respect, using a variety of multimodal techniques in specific online contexts such as real-time online chats, email correspondence and observations of posting activity, reflects the various means of Internet communication with which users themselves may feel most comfortable.

I have indicated above that the adaptive nature of virtual ethnography can lead to the construction of 'partial' accounts. Adaptive ethnography also led me to make the decision that it would not be productive to employ questionnaires in my sample. This was largely due to my hesitancy towards this more impersonal approach (see Hine 2000: 75-76), in addition to my expectation of poor response rates after repeatedly encountering difficulty in maintaining contact with many members outside of the forum spaces.[127] I also felt committed to the notion that ethnographic research should attempt to study groups in their natural settings and not disrupt or influence behaviour by foregrounding the research as a topic for discussion (see King 1996; Baym 2000).

After my lengthy fan participation in the Sopranoland Forum, I followed the ethical practice of approaching the webmistress about my research intentions and proceeded regularly to inform members about my researcher's identity in a brief, off-topic post. I often included a short message about the project and added a link to my 'research homepage', which supplied another link to The University of Bristol, Department of Drama's webpage. Interested fans could then contact me through the Sopranoland email facility or via my private email. I also approached the main moderator in Yahoo! SopranosForum through private emails and was later welcomed as a fan member who was conducting research. My signature file[128] at the end of every message I posted was a useful tool, as it signalled my researcher identity and provided a link to my research homepage. I offered both groups the opportunity to read a paper I presented at an academic conference as a way of informing them about my research progress and welcomed feedback.[129] While some members noted they had visited my research homepage, none,

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[127] See, for example, Ruddock's (1998) and Hine's (2000) discussion of these difficulties.
[128] A signature file can be attached to the end of a user's message in newsgroups or in emails, and can offer contact details, webpage addresses, or may contain humorous, witty quotations.
[129] Paper Title: 'Since the Sopranos is not a soap opera…: Fan Performance, aftermath and self-reflexivity in Sopranoland.com'; Presented at 'Console-ing Passions Conference; New Orleans, LA, USA, May 30–

however, appeared interested in commenting on the work in progress. As the final 'writing up' stage of the research arrived, I offered the moderators and highly visible members from both sites the opportunity to comment on draft texts for Chapters 6 and 7. Three members agreed and were sent files, yet, after a few months and further emails, these members have still not provided feedback. Five others did not reply to my first email.

Sopranoland Forum's webmistress and the Yahoo! SopranosForum creator/moderator consistently supported my role as researcher by suggesting that members contact me throughout the fieldwork, however, few took up the offer. Halfway into the fieldwork I attempted another strategy and sent a message to both forums asking members if they would be interested in sharing their more private thoughts on the series and their forum experiences in the form of a Season Five 'diary' (see Appendix 1).[130] After a week I followed this up by sending private emails to more visibly active posters. Two individuals responded and expressed some initial enthusiasm yet, even after further prompts, they never carried out the task.[131] This following response from one highly visible Sopranoland Forum moderator offers some insight into why such methods may be problematic:

> Wow, thanks for your flattering offer to participate in your Sops project (sounds like fun!). Unfortunately, I don't feel I can dedicate any more time than I already have/do to this obsession called the Sopranos. Just posting as much as I do during first run episodes is currently threatening my productivity in "real life" endeavors, not to mention the time I spend lurking at other boards and helping moderate the Sopranoland forums. So although I'm sure I would get a lot of enjoyment out of participating in your project, I think it's best that I politely decline.
>
> I trust you will find others that can devote the time and energy your endeavor requires. I wish you much luck and success and look forward to hearing your report of how it all turns out.
>
> Regards
>
> (April 25, 2004)

This reply suggests that while active online fans may feel competent and comfortable with computer-mediated communication (CMC), they will choose to communicate in this manner on their own terms, and in many cases, in the forum space where they are likely to devote much of their fan related activity. To assume that this fan's choice not to respond to a researcher's request is merely a consequence of the individual's time constraints, however, is to ignore the collective affective purpose of the fan newsgroup, as my discussion in Chapter 1 explored. In

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June 3, 2004. For more work on ethics in Internet research, see Allen 1996; King 1996; Sharf 1999; and Mann & Stewart 2000.

[130] In the case of Yahoo! SopranosForum I corresponded regularly with the moderator who made final decisions about which posts were appropriate. I have provided documentation of my email and the response in Appendix 1.

[131] This was after I contacted the members a few times through email and in the case of one fan, I brought up the subject again during a weekly online chat.

this respect, my role as the 'researcher' may not fulfil the same potential for this member, or indeed the other members I approached, for reflexive identity affirmation as the willing audience of others in the 'community of imagination' (Hills 2002).[132]

In the overall course of the project I did manage to maintain contact with some individuals who seemed happy to chat for extended periods and others who agreed to correspond in lengthy emails. After the end of Season Five, I made the decision to post a list of questions in both forums and received a total of 9 responses from the Yahoo! SopranosForum (see Appendix 2). These numbers, however, are minimal, compared to the documented membership in online forums. This means that it has been difficult to confirm any specific social demographics of the community membership in the two sites, beyond Sopranoland Forum's site listing, and the assumption, if I rely on the content of messages and my correspondences, that most posters were geographically based in the US (with the exception of some as the data analysis suggests) and that many fell within the programme's targeted age group of 18-49.[133] As many newsgroups and message board forums also follow norms of behaviour that often expect performances of authenticity (Hine 2000; Baym 2000), for example in one's performance of gender, it would also appear that the active membership in these sites contained an approximate equal number of male and female fans.

5.8 FIELDWORK DATA RESULTS OVERVIEW

This section deals more specifically with the presentation of data results for the two main category levels within the sampled weeks outlined above. I also discuss in more detail how I developed my coding procedure through my repeated readings of posts. This discussion also considers the comparative relationships between posting topics and patterns of fans' modes of discourse within those topics in the sampled weeks.

At the end of Week 14 the total number of posts for every week in Yahoo! SopranosForum was 1,661. This number was minimal compared to the Sopranoland Forum site where posts added up to a total of 10,316, producing an overall total of 11, 977. The heaviest posting week for Sopranoland Forum was Week 12, in response to Episode 12, 'Long Term Parking' (May 23, 2004), with a total of 1,869 posts (see Figure 1). The same Week 12 total postings for Yahoo! SopranosForum were 141. Posting activity in the Sopranoland Forum (as well as membership numbers) increased with each subsequent week, with the exception of Weeks 4 and 5 where there was a slight decrease in postings. Activity increased sharply in Week 12, yet decreased over the US Memorial Day weekend and increased again during the final week of the fieldwork.

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[132] I am thankful to Matt Hills for reminding me of this obvious point during my presentation at Cardiff University in which I discussed this example. Paper Title: 'Writing the self into ethnography: memory, personal narrative and the negotiation of a speaking position'. Presented at: Cardiff University, UK, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies (JOMEC), March 21, 2007.

[133] Ruddock (1998: 308) provides a useful discussion of the problems involved with locating any 'clearly definable subset of fans' in this type of research.

Yahoo! SopranosForum initially showed a decrease in posting activity after Week 3 up to Week 8. Activity gradually increased again during Weeks 9 to 12a* (with a dip during Week 10) and then decreased during the final week. Where membership numbers rose in the Sopranoland Forum and newer members engaged in regular weekly online chats immediately following the week`s episode, it was noticeable that long-term members in Yahoo! SopranosForum and some who were previously highly visible participants, posted much less or not at all in the Week 12 sample.

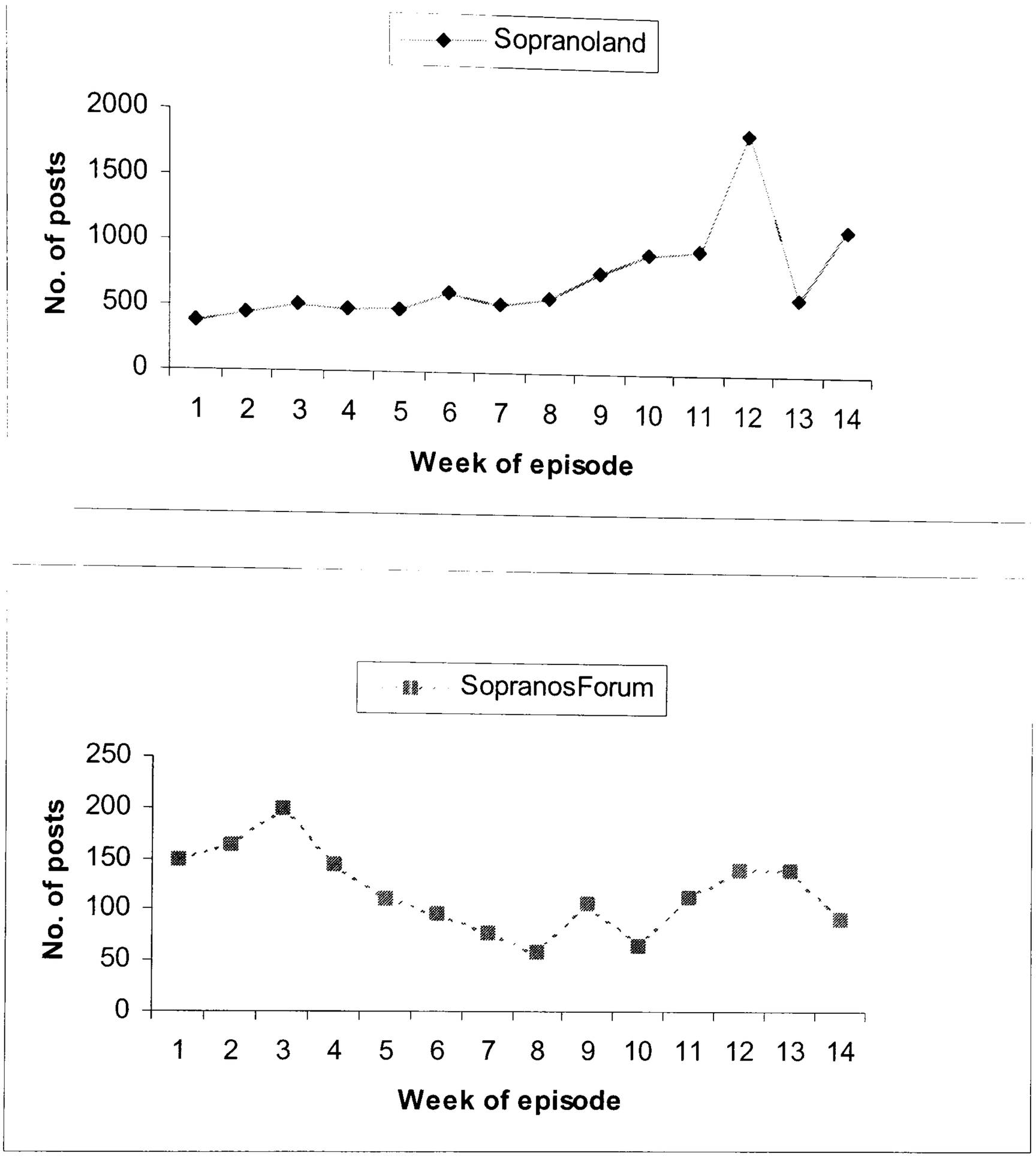

Figure 1: The number of postings for each week of Season Five for Sopranoland Forum and Yahoo! SopranosForum

Posts from Week 12 were organised under four main 'Level 1' categories (see Table 1): *The Sopranos* Details, Fandom, Extratextual Resources, and Internet Usage, and were selected for further coding.

Topic titles	Sopranoland Forum	Yahoo! SopranosForum
The Sopranos Details		
Episode 12: "Long Term Parking"	1,219 (65%)	56 (40%)
Season 5 Spoilers:	395 (21%)	25 (18%)
Season 5 General Discussion (no spoilers)	51 (3%)	0 (0%)
The characters	40 (2%)	18 (13%)
General topics	39 (2%)	2 (1%)
The music	16 (1%)	7 (5%)
Episode 11, "The Test Dream"	26 (1%)	4 (3%)
Fandom	30 (2%)	3 (2%)
Extratextual references	27 (1%)	19 (13%)
Internet usage	0 (0%)	5 (4%)
Totals*	1,869 (100%)	141 (100%)

* Topic titles with generally <1% are not shown hence the total will not add up to 100%

Table 1: Total Level 1 category postings across Sopranoland Forum and Yahoo! SopranosForum for Week 12.

5.8.1 Key topic areas

A large percentage of posts in the sites for Week 12 were categorised under 'Episode Discussion' and 'Spoilers' (see Table 1). This is not surprising, considering fans' use of the Internet as a vehicle to discuss the most up to date events in their favourite show and to make future predictions, many of which may be based on external sources (i.e., press accounts, interviews, or information obtained from an officially claimed 'HBO' source). Yahoo! SopranosForum also included a relatively higher percentage of posts in the 'Characters' topic category, (18% compared to 2% in Sopranoland Forum) even when discussions of characters were specific to that week's episode. In Sopranoland, any general business about characters (character history from previous episodes or seasons) was usually located in the separate 'Characters' thread, and any character discussion specific to a week's episode was usually filed as a sub-topic thread under the larger Episode Discussion topic. An equal amount of 13% of posts in Yahoo! SopranosForum was also calculated in 'Extratextual references'. The percentage of posts for Week 12 falling under the category 'Spoilers' was also consistent between the sites with only marginal differences (21% in Sopranoland Forum and 18% in Yahoo! SopranosForum).

In my attempt to gain an overall sense of the modes of fan discourse that arose throughout the sampled weeks, I decided first to code the content of all the posts, including those within the topics where there were fewer messages. This was a slow process for Sopranoland Forum's messages, yet many that fell into categories outside of the 'Episode Discussion' and 'Spoilers' sections generally had fewer lines and were less time consuming.

5.9 'LEVEL 2' ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES AND CODING PROCEDURES

My earlier observations in several *Sopranos* forums allowed me to devise an initial plan for coding recurring themes. This early designation of codes was understood as provisional and

subject to change after gathering later materials from the sampled weeks. After rereading data, it became clear that some categories of talk resembled those developed in previous audience reception studies (Liebes & Katz 1993; Baym 2000; Barker et al. 2001). These categories allowed me to distinguish three conceptual areas for analysis. I proceeded to code the sampled weeks' postings from both fan sites using the qualitative analysis software 'Atlas.ti'.[134]

All of the three main Level 2 conceptual categories I identified have implications for how a television-fan ethnography can explore the discursive strategies fan utilise as they construct a sense of self in relation to the text and perform their fan identities with a large community of others in a virtual digital environment. It is important to note that the Level 2 areas draw on three 'overlapping' realms of fan experience, with all three areas informing each other. I have labelled these three larger categories: (I) Critical Apprehension of Genre/Text; (II) Experiential Involvement; and (III) Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks.

I: 'Critical Apprehension of Genre/Text' encompasses eight coding categories that reveal the various topics and discourses fans draw upon which are specific to how one understands, more specifically through previously acquired media knowledge or 'media literacy,'[135] the general properties of genre and text. In drawing attention to fans' use of aesthetic criteria and critical skills, this area, in particular, in conjunction with modes of discourse within the third conceptual area, raises questions about the relationship between fans' display of knowledge (textual and extratextual) and their distinction and status within the community (see my discussion in Chapter 3).

II: The second category, 'Experiential Involvement', contains four codes that capture certain discourses of 'the self' that are expressed through fans' affective pleasures with the text. My application of the first two codes 'Personalisation' and 'Character identification' reflects television drama's emphasis on thematic storytelling and in particular, character development. As the television serial or series borrows many features from the soap opera, this focus allows

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[134] Similar to other qualitative analysis software packages (NUD*ist, Ethnograph, Qualpro), Atlas.ti provides the analyst with the tools necessary to manage and analyse large amounts of text, graphical, audio, or video based data. It is important to stress that the software itself does not perform creative or complex conceptual tasks. Its interface design, based on the principles of Grounded Theory, lets the analyst develop concepts and discover hidden phenomena. It is the emerging phenomena, and not a tight set of *a priori* research protocols, that ultimately shapes the final analysis. Beginning with simple, qualitative analysis coding procedures such as initial 'open coding', the software facilitates later examination of relationships between codes which may evolve into a hierarchical 'family tree' structure. Open coding involves fracturing the data to identify categories, recurring themes and concepts in texts and assigning codes to them. Early codes tend to be more descriptive, drawing primarily from an individual's own use of terminology. The next level of 'axial coding' reflects the process of putting back together the fractured data in order to develop the open codes into a more abstract and conceptual interpretation of texts (see Strauss & Corbin 1990: Chapters 5&6). Atlas ti. does not incorporate axial coding but develops other procedures which reflect this process of development. Codes and their selected quotations are accurately calculated, allowing cross comparisons and making later data retrieval far less labour intensive than traditional methods.

[135] See, for example, Henry Jenkins's website and the summary of his work in the area of 'media literacy'. Available at: http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/consume.html. Accessed on December 1, 2004.

the textual exploitation of a diverse range of emotional experiences which viewers and fans may relate to their own lived reality and place of belonging in the world. These codes hence introduce complex questions with regards to ways in which fans might conceive of the 'real' in relation to the fictional narrative and vice versa. Biographical narrative expresses discourse in which notions of located place, or bounded offline communities to which fans belong, are deemed significant in online interactions. The code 'Emotional utterance', reflects how fans may have difficulty articulating their own 'imaginative journey' with the text (Harrington & Bielby 2005). Such examples suggests the intense, affective experience of fandom, which may require a form of analysis that seeks to examine the nature of absences in texts thus moving away from the exclusive focus on cognitive processes.

III: The categories of talk identified in the third area, 'Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks' call further attention to other areas of prior or external audience orientation, such as industrial led marketing and advertising campaigns, popular press accounts, moral or ideological political subject positionings, and wider cultural reference points that shape viewing expectations and opportunities for meaning making (see Barker *et al.* 2001). Fans' experience of the aesthetic formal qualities of the primary text is hence supplemented, enhanced or challenged by these orientations which are taken up in the forums and used as materials for fan performance.

In total I identified 18 main codes, all of which fall under the three Level 2 categories. Three of these codes (Critical, aesthetic evaluation; Genre recognition; and Narrative talk) also include further sub-coded family members, which are explained within the larger code description below. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the Level 2 areas and indicates the quantitative coding results for both forums. Following this section is a discussion of the coding categories that fall under the heading 'Social relations and group dynamics'. This area emphasises the analysis of features that characterise further dimensions of social interaction in the forum.

5.9.1 Description of 'Level 2' Codes

5.9.1.1 I: Critical Apprehension of Genre/Text

a) **Critical, aesthetic evaluation**: How viewers use their 'technical skills' in evaluating the television text. This kind of evaluative computer-mediated communication may include a more general description of the following: good or bad qualities of the acting, writing or script, quality of the overall production values (eg. aesthetics, lighting, music, mise en scene, etc.). Other hierarchical 'family members' or sub-codes associated with this larger code were identified as discourse related to the following: Episode rating (fans' rating of an episode from 1 to 10, best to worst, using expressions such as 'amazing', 'the best one of the season', etc.); Disappointment (explicit use of the term 'disappointment' to describe episode or scene, including phrases such as 'letdown', 'painful to see', 'fell to the bottom', etc.); Rewatching (where fans identified how many times they 'rewatched' episodes/scenes under discussion) .

b) **Hierarchical generic comparisons**: This mode appears most obviously when viewers compare the series with other genres across the televisual 'flow' (Williams 1974) and classify them according to a hierarchy, eg. HBO at the top vs. US network TV at the bottom. This discourse often dominates discussions about the show's 'quality'. However, some examples of this are also noted in fan created text that compares the appropriation of generic formulas within the series' narrative itself. In other words, viewers may be in agreement or not about the value they find in storylines that focus on the 'Mob' family rather than the 'domestic' family. Finally, much discourse that falls within this code may also challenge a poster's narrative speculations by accusing the poster of contriving fantastical or implausible 'soap-opera' like clichés.

c) **Genre recognition**: When viewers' evaluative posts draw specifically on their knowledge of a variety of generic conventions or systems of meaning which the series may appropriate from film, television, or other cultural texts. Fans thus may often not only express pleasure in recognising the series' employment of the conventions, themes and tropes of the American gangster film, they use this knowledge to make future predictions and judge the plausibility of a storyline or a character's actions. The following sub-codes were associated with this larger category: Realism [any discourse that explicitly mentions the term 'realism' in relation to generic or cultural verisimilitude (Neale 1990)]; Symbolism (any discussion that explicitly mentions the term 'symbolism', or implies it, in relation to generic themes of the series).

d) **Narrative talk**[136]: When fans' critical evaluations centre more specifically on syntagmatic narrative structures. Fans may thus critique the value of the series as a whole, or its separate episodes and their events, based on the ways in which writers introduce and resolve storylines (between episodes or seasons) or leave some open-ended. Sub-codes identified as part of the narrative talk 'family' are: Surprise (explicit mention that a fan was surprised by the episode's outcome, or use of terms such as 'unexpected', 'unbelievable', 'did not see it coming', 'caught me off guard', etc.); and Suspense (explicit mention of the terms suspense, tense, or tension, and use of following phrases to describe one's physical reaction to narrative suspense, 'I was on the edge of my seat', 'we were holding our breath', 'my heart was beating so fast', etc.).

e) **Narrative or textual description**: When the viewer generally offers a summary or explicit description of narrative events or dialogue.

f) **Suggestion for narrative**: When the author/poster makes a speculation about the direction of the future narrative plots or developments, or when the poster puts forward a suggestion about the content's narrative meaning.

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[136] It is worth noting my choice of the term 'talk' which I use here and in some of the following codes. Although, in practice, as Baym (2000) notes, while asynchronous online interaction differs greatly from actual face-to-face talk or conversation, my choice of the term reflects many users' own perception of the phenomenon, which may reflect wider internet descriptive rhetoric (i.e., use of the phrases 'discussion forum', 'chat room', etc.).

g) **Ludic**: This code relates to more explicitly playful narrative speculations or 'suggestions for narrative', (or other instances of communication) which are not justified or 'qualified' with additional text based on a more rational framework.

h) **Characterisation**: This code relates to any discussions about narrative characterisation (construction of character 'traits', a character's morals, psychology, motivations) or, more generally, any discourse that mentions characters or relationships and events between characters. It may often be accompanied by the 'suggestion for narrative' code as viewers interpret narrative meaning from their understanding of the character.

5.9.1.2 II: Experiential Involvement

a) **Personalisation**: When viewers personalise or compare the series' themes to their own lived experiences.

b) **Character identification**: Discourse that reflects a viewer's identification with a character or characters through personalisation of the fictional character's experience (eg., when a fan writes he knows what Tony is going through because he has experienced the same thing in his own life). This identification could also take place at the level of fantasy, pretending or the 'subjunctive', where the fan imagines what they would do if they took the place of the character in the fictional world ('If I were the mob boss I would whack…').

c) **Biographical narrative**: Content that could either simply state where the poster is from or offer information about their off-line identity such as gender, occupation, or family, love or friendship relations. Some biographical narrative may also include details about the domestic contexts of viewing, eg. with whom they watch.

d) **Emotional utterances**: This refers to any text in which emotional responses to *The Sopranos* or other Off-Topic forum discussions, are expressed or are implied. These utterances may exhibit difficulty in clearly articulating a position based on a rational framework as in; 'i…don't know what to say. No more Ade.' Or 'Just a gut feeling.'

5.9.1.3 III: Theoretical or Conceptual Frameworks

a) **Broad referential frameworks**: Drawing on Liebes and Katz's (1993) work this code reflects viewers' interpretations which rely on their comparisons to a wide variety of 'real life' wider cultural contexts.

b) **Extratextual orientation**: Includes utterances that draw on a variety of cultural texts outside of the series, such as popular press reviews, radio sources, or television interviews with director or cast members about the series in general. Comparisons may also be made between the show's narrative and non-fictional books such as 'real' life mafia accounts or references to 'real' geographical places within the show's diegesis.

c) **Ideological, moral frameworks**: Explicit discourse that emerges from a viewer's response to a moral or ideological issue which they perceive the series' narrative events may represent, such as its portrayal of woman, ethnicity or its treatment of race. Thus, as in Barker *et al.*'s (2001) use of this code, it is the 'explicit evaluative talk...which evidences frameworks of beliefs (political, moral, religious, ideological) external to the [text] which shapes evaluations of it' (*ibid.*: 169).

d) **Industrial, economic modes of production**: When viewers make references to Nielsen ratings, HBO subscription costs, or other economic factors such as marketing strategies (including HBO 'previews/trailers', HBO web-based incentives) and issues which may affect viewers' reception inside and outside of the USA. I also include in this mode viewers' interpretations or speculations that refer to circumstances outside the text such as time delays in filming or season hiatuses. Associated with this code was discourse that implied or specifically expressed viewer 'anticipation' (eg., sentiments of excitement about the final episode). This falls under the 'IEP' code because it was HBO's decision to postpone the final episode one extra week that prompted many of these comments.

e) **Talk about authorship**: When fans rely on notions of 'authorship' when speculating (whether based on textual evidence or reported journalistic or other extratextual accounts) about the meaning behind the direction of the series' narrative. This extends the traditional film studies' notions of the 'auteur', which ascribed creative authorship to a film's 'director', and includes talk that refers to the series' cable producer HBO. By doing this I consider how fan discourse itself draws on an 'ideology of quality' and 'auteurism' (Hills 2002: 133) when discussing the role of HBO as contributor of meaning for the series. The cable producer and the team of HBO writers who fans see as working closely under the leadership of David Chase, the series' 'creator', are often seen as an inseparable unit of authorship.

f) **Talk about fans or audiences**: This relates to any communication that either specifically mentions the term 'fan/s' or which includes discussion about the series' audience or viewers. In addition, I include talk that alludes to an intended, implied audience or audience community.

5.10 SOCIAL RELATIONS AND GROUP DYNAMICS

Jenkins (1992: 88) emphasises the importance of fans' negotiation of interpretative work in arriving at group consensus and thus shaping the identity of a fan community. Therefore, in order for one to become socialised into a fandom, an individual must, Jenkins (*ibid.*: 89) writes, learn the interpretative codes and conventions commonly used and legitimated by its membership. In short, one must learn 'the right way' (*ibid.*). One way of exploring how an online fan community establishes its collective identity through accepted norms of practice, or 'the right way', is to interrogate the common discursive strategies participants use in forum interaction, which may involve the sanctioning of what is said. In addition to the modes of

discourse identified above, Fairclough's (1992: 152) focus on 'interactional control features' offers a useful point from which to consider this enquiry:

> Interactional control features ensure smooth interactional organisation – the distribution of norms, selection and change of topics, opening and closing of interactions, and so forth. Interactional control is always exercised to some extent collaboratively by participants, but there may be asymmetry between participants by the degree of control. The interactional control conventions of a genre embody specific claims about social and power relations between participants. The investigation of interactional control is therefore a means of explicating the concrete enactment and negotiation of social relations in social practice.

Fairclough's analysis is applied to conversation and focuses on the analytical properties of texts, which include 'interactional control', 'modality' 'politeness' and 'ethos'. Interactional control includes attention to turn-taking, exchange structure, topic control, control of agendas, and formulation (a form of policing mechanism) (*ibid.*: 138; 157). Modality is defined as a key dimension of grammar which relates to 'the 'interpersonal' function of language' (*ibid.*: 158). All utterances display properties of modality in varying degrees. This is illustrated through the different ways in which speakers assert their 'affinity' with a proposition they put forward. One may assert that 'the earth is flat' or deny it; 'the earth is not flat'. Modal auxillary verbs such as 'must', 'can', or 'should', function to realise modality (*ibid.*: 158-159). Fairclough adds however, 'there are also available various less categorical and less determinate degrees of commitment to it or against it: the earth may be/is probably/is possibly/is sort of flat, for example' (*ibid.*: 158). Low or high modalities are always produced in social interactions and are 'difficult to disentangle' from one's 'affinity, or solidarity with interactants' (*ibid.*: 159). Politeness is described as 'an aspect of… 'force'' (*ibid.*: 138). Fairclough extends the terms of politeness as a strategy for mitigating[137] speech acts which present a potential threat (as proposed in accounts that see 'language use as shaped by the intentions of the individuals' [*ibid.*:162]) and considers how politeness conventions embody social and power relations. Fairclough adds that ethos 'is motivated by a focus on the self' or the signalling of a social identity (*ibid.*:138 & 166). Ethos implies a focus on intertextuality which is concerned with the deployment of various discourse types in the constitution of subjectivity (*ibid.*: 166).

Fairclough's proposal is useful yet it is important to note that his 'critical' approach to discourse analysis (CDA) has been criticised by Widdowson (1995) on the basis of its prior ideological commitment, 'and then it selects for analysis such texts as will support the preferred interpretation' (cited in Titscher *et al.* 2000:163-164). Conversation analysts assert that CDA's goal should be compatible with what is 'relevant for the behaviour of its participants' (Schegloff 1998, cited in Titscher *et al.* 2000: 163). Fairclough, however, as Titscher *et al.* (2000) note, responds to criticisms by drawing 'attention to the open-endedness of results required in the

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[137] Barker & Galasinski (2001: 112) define mitigating devices as 'expressions that are used to soften the intention behind the unwelcome action'.

principles of CDA' (Tishcer *et al.* 2000: 164, citing Fairclough 1996). My analysis of utterances produced through interaction in computer-mediated communication places such an emphasis on the 'open-endedness of results', which can often introduce unexpected contradictions. This means that extralinguistic features such as ideology, important to CDA, will be considered as these relate to the local context of the social interaction.

An examination of newsgroup disagreements offers a useful means through which to begin an analysis of an online group's negotiation of social relations. Drawing on Potter's (1996) method of discourse analysis, which 'suggests that all accounts are produced from an awareness that any account is potentially in competition with alternative versions', Hine writes:

> Newsgroups provide a particularly testing ground for the production of factual accounts. Any statement made in a posting can be subsequently challenged by another. Because the setting is construed as interactive, any statement not only in principle is open to challenge, but in practice is often challenged. There is a general practice on newsgroups that agreeing with a posting is not enough to justify posting a message saying that you agree. This avoids the newsgroup being filled with messages that consist of nothing besides 'me too'. (2000: 125)

The newsgroup norm of adding something more to the discussion than just 'me too' sets up the possibility for posters to find it easier to disagree than agree, as the message content becomes 'justification for the author to post' (*ibid.*). Hine established that various 'Louise Woodward' newsgroups' distinctiveness was made apparent through their engagement with different topics and styles of discussion, including different ways of framing their disagreements (*ibid.*). Baym's detailed attention to 'Strategies and Topics of disagreements' allowed her to focus on the soap opera community's management of interpersonal relationships (Baym 2000: 28-29; see also *ibid.*: Chapter 4). In comparing agreements and disagreements Baym asserts that rather than focus on what behaviour is used to avoid conflict, she considers the discursive strategies members used to maintain an ongoing ethic of friendliness even when disagreements occurred. She then considers how, for example, 'partial agreements' which prefaced disagreements, functioned to help 'build affiliation' (*ibid.*: 125). It is important also to note, however, echoing Fairclough, that 'polite' conflict avoidance, as Jenkins writes, 'can result in an artificial consensus which shuts down the desired play with alternative meanings' (2002: 162, citing Baym 2000; see page 212).

My earlier pilot study work and my analysis from this data sample confirm MacDonald's (1998) assertions that many fandoms, while attempting to construct themselves through a utopian lens often associated with the term 'community', are also highly competitive and hierarchical. As suggested in Chapter 3, Hills (2002: 46, emphasis in original) also proposes that researchers might begin to understand fan cultures as 'both' community and '*also as a social hierarchy* where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status'. Considering these observations and keeping in mind the necessity

of narrowing down this large volume of data for sampling, I have identified which areas in the sampled weeks have the most disagreements and have used this quantitative data as a starting point from which to establish where some broader connections emerge between the two fan sites. It is important to reiterate that my attention to disagreements is concerned with establishing a breadth of analysis of online fan identity performance across the two sites, serving to examine why some discussions may either progress or be controlled/repressed around certain topics. Inevitably, some overview of the management of topics and other relevant areas such as 'agreements' occurring around these debates will also be considered.

The prioritising of breadth over depth, as well as considering the time and space constraints of this PhD research, also has consequences for how I proceeded to employ these following additional codes within my analysis. While I have not provided a detailed quantitative analysis of the following coded occurrences, as does Baym (2000), they inflect my analyses of the groups' interactions and are discussed, next to examples, where relevant. In my efforts to identify interactive features which might affect the groups' social dynamics, I considered the significance of these codes: applauding another poster/s, expression of gratitude, use of qualifying phrases such as 'I think', 'I might be in the minority but', apology, use of humour or sarcasm (either as mitigation device or to cause disharmony), request for response, use of other's name, and use of own offline name. Also relevant to Fairclough's interactional control model and specific to Sopranoland Forum's ezboard function, is the visible notation of 'Moderated' posts, which indicate where messages have been edited by a moderator. My analyses in Chapters 6 and 7 also takes into account the way in which Sopranoland Forum's ezboard community enhances the construction of an online fan identity by encouraging members to 'Move Up' and increase their status. The degree to which an individual is recognised in the group therefore depends upon his/her level of posting commitment which is depicted through the site's appropriation of the Mob community's hierarchy: Newcomers, Goomba, Big Goomba, Associate, Soldier, Made Man, Capo, Consiglieri. Moderators take 'Capo' status, and Consiglieris are 'administrators', the highest in the hierarchy. With all Sopranoland Forum posts I refer to in Chapters 6 and 7, I have noted the status of members and the date and number of posts, as the information appears in all forum messages. As indicated earlier in Chapter 4 (see footnote 106), in order to protect the anonymity of individual members, I have removed user and/or offline names from both forums' postings and correspondences. The original grammatical form of these fan-authored texts, including examples in the concluding chapter, has been left intact.

Before I discuss the disagreement and agreement quantitative results under 'The debates' section, the following section will return to the subject of the Level 2 coding categories.

5.11 OVERVIEW OF 'LEVEL 2' RESULTS

The following Figure 2 summarises the quantitative data for the Level 2 conceptual categories across both fan sites. This shows both the number of coded occurrences and the ranking within each of the three larger categories, i.e. the most common code is given a rank of 1, the second most common 2, and so on. The two conceptual areas with the most occurrences of 'talk' throughout all topics in both forums appeared in *Characterisation* and *Suggestion for narrative*.[138] It seems unsurprising that the results show that fans' discussion about the series involves intense engagement with these areas. Fans also gain much pleasure, as well as acquire their individual fan identity and status within the community through their knowledgeable and critical discussions about narrative, future events and the series' aesthetic qualities.

Comparing the two sites, one can also see fairly similar patterns of the emergence of other discourse types. Fans across both sites were fairly consistent in their categorisation rankings for both *critical apprehension of genre/text* and *experiential involvement*, though there were differences for *theoretical or conceptual frameworks,* with Sopranoland Forum fans referring to *industrial and economic modes of production* far more than the Yahoo! SopranosForum fans. While representing the quantitative data in this fashion is useful in a broad sense, it is also quite limited, as it does not directly relate the Level 2 codes to the areas of disagreements or the interactive control features discussed above.

In the following section (5.12) I describe the quantitative results for disagreements and agreements for the two sites. This summary sets the tone for the more thorough qualitative analysis of the relationship between the data results in Chapters 6 and 7.

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[138] By this I mean the total amount of highlighted words or 'quotations' (sentences or paragraphs) throughout the entire Atlas.ti document for that week's sample. Atlas.ti could not convert the total number of quotations to percentages. I suspect this impossibility reflects the nature of the flexibility the user has in choosing what may constitute a quotation throughout the whole of the file, or what Atlas.ti calls the 'Hermeneutic Unit' which is comprised of primary documents or, in this case, the many downloaded posts from both forums.

		Sopranoland Forum	Yahoo! SopranosForum
		occurrences	(ranking)
CRITICAL APPREHENSION OF GENRE/TEXT	Critical aesthetic evaluation	223 (4)	23 (3)
	Hierarchical generic comparison	30 (7)	3 (8)
	Genre recognition	114 (5)	9 (6)
	Narrative talk	107 (6)	11 (5)
	Narrative or textual description	286 (3)	15 (4)
	Suggestion for narrative	849 (2)	57 (2)
	Ludic	14 (8)	3 (8)
	Characterisation	1,204 (1)	80 (1)
EXPERIENTIAL INVOLVEMENT	Personalisation	20 (3)	1 (3)
	Character identification	16 (4)	0 (4)
	Biographical narrative	67 (2)	6 (2)
	Emotional utterances	101 (1)	9 (1)
THEORETICAL OR CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS	Broad referential frameworks	125 (2)	12 (4)
	Extratextual orientation	121 (3)	31 (1)
	Talk about authorship	120 (4)	9 (5)
	Industrial economic modes of production	286 (1)	20 (3)
	Ideological/moral frameworks	44 (6)	6 (6)
	Talk about fans or audiences	83 (5)	26 (2)

Figure 2: The occurrences of Level 2 conceptual categorisations across the two fan sites.

5.12 THE DEBATES: AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS

In summary, Sopranoland Forum's Week 12 sample included 446 disagreements (24% of total posts) and 369 agreements (20% of total posts). Yahoo! SopranosForum's Week 12 included 27 disagreements (19% of total posts) and 20 agreements (14% of total posts). In many posts from both sites it was clear when a poster agreed or disagreed as they would have referred to the post in question by directly quoting it. This is a common practice in Yahoo! and Usenet newsgroups and web based forums and bulletin boards. In many cases posters did not follow this practice yet they may have referred specifically to the other individual's position. Remaining posts

throughout the sample neither agreed nor disagreed. In these cases it was either difficult to discern the clarity of the poster's position in relation to another message or the post may have also developed an entirely new argument. Similarly, many opening posts may have been presented in a way that did not invite agreement or disagreement. It is also worth noting the multiple layers of disagreements and agreements. There were many examples where a member clearly agreed with another poster who disagreed with a prior position who may have, in turn, agreed with the poster who opened the original discussion. The boundaries here between the origins of agreements or disagreements therefore are far more blurred. In some cases, a single post may have also included both agreements and disagreements, what Baym (2000) might describe as 'partial agreements'. It is partly for these reasons, I stress again, that my use of this quantitative data for the sampled weeks served as an entry point only for developing further qualitative analysis.

5.12.1 Week 12 Episode Discussion and Spoiler Disagreements

5.12.1.1 Sopranoland Forum

Out of the 446 disagreements in the Sopranoland Forum sample, 302 appeared throughout Episode 12 Discussion threads. The other high proportion of 109 disagreements appeared in Spoilers topic threads, with the remaining 45 appearing throughout other subject titles. Considering the higher concentration of disagreements in the former two areas, my analysis will largely draw on examples from these topic threads. Examples from the same areas in the Yahoo! SopranosForum Week 12 sample will also be considered.

I examined the content of disagreements throughout all of the Sopranoland Forum Episode 12 Discussion postings and identified those that focussed on particular characters and related storylines. The highest number of 83 disagreements focussed on Tony Soprano's motivations and related storylines. The next highest number of 58 disagreements related more specifically to discussions about Adriana and the characters or events surrounding her death. The higher number of disagreements involving evaluations of other characters who were closely involved with Tony or Adriana circulated within the threads that focussed on Christopher (25), Matush (21), Carmela (14) and Silvio (11). The remainding 90 disagreements were more diverse and were classified as 'other'. In an attempt to provide the reader with further context for these results and the discussion in Chapters 6 and 7, I have provided a detailed synopsis of Episode 12, 'Long Term Parking', in Appendix 3.

5.12.1.2 Yahoo! SopranosForum

The percentage of disagreements in Yahoo! SopranosForum across the sample was approximately 5-6% lower than in Sopranoland Forum. As there were fewer members posting in Yahoo! SopranosForum, the variety of responses and their writing styles also appeared less diverse. It therefore became quite noticeable when some regular posters frequently responded with brief statements. Out of 27 instances with disagreements, 6 of the messages containing

them included only 1 or 2 lines, and 1 included 3 lines. Earlier posts from Week 3 of the fieldwork, interestingly, illustrated requests from two of the forum's moderators asking members to 'trim' their posts down (delete excess quotes from previous messages), and to avoid posting 'one-liners'. Although some members continued to post brief replies, this request may have set the tone for non-replies and absences in later weeks. It is possible, therefore, that members who felt their potential responses were not worthy of attention might have stopped posting altogether by Week 12.[139] I explore this possibility and the tensions arising from the hierarchical and competitive side of fan activity by drawing on postings from the spoilers' topic thread. This leads me to note another observation regarding the role of forum moderation in both groups. It was noticeable that the Yahoo! SopranosForum creator and moderator did not post frequently but when he/she did the posts were usually lengthy. In contrast, one moderator in Sopranoland Forum whose posts showed up frequently in the Week 12 sample regularly posted short one-liners, some of which simply stated 'Agreed'. The role of forum moderation and netiquette will be explored in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7 next to relevant examples.

Seventeen disagreements in the Yahoo! SopranosForum Week 12 sample surfaced in Episode 12 Discussion, 2 were found in Characters, 2 others in Episode 11 Discussion, and 6 fell under spoilers. It is important to note, however, the one issue that facilitated disagreements in the spoilers' thread also arose in the previous Week 11 collection of data, and carried over into 21 of the posts in the following Week 12a collection, hence dominating the area of disputes.

Many of my insights about the two groups' establishment of ethos, solidarity and the ways in which multiple levels of fan hierarchies function in these spaces, emerged from my lengthy participant-observation in the sites where I established my dual role as scholar-fan. In the following Chapters 6 and 7, I will explore in greater depth the themes that arose from my qualitative analysis, taking into account some of the challenges I encountered when adopting this multiple subject position.

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[139] This assumption is difficult to substantiate through empirical data. As others have noted (Ruddock 1998; Baym 2000; Hine 2000), while published membership in newsgroup forums may be high, it is less clear how many individuals remain active as posters or lurkers over long periods of time.

Chapter 6: Assessing fan performance

6.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to begin a close examination of the phenomena that emerged from a range of research methods that contributed to the construction of this virtual fan ethnography. In asking my first research question 'What impact do intratextual and extratextual constraints have in the creation of *The Sopranos'* online fan community?', I was able to explore how the complex textual and hybrid generic dimensions of the series, its surrounding texts and systems of production, inform the experiences of the audience as a community in social interaction. Close examination of Sopranoland Forum fan discourse allowed me to consider the complexity of articulating the viewing experience while questioning why some areas of fan-discourse, such as the modes described in *critical apprehension of genre/text*, may often dominate discussions, and in combination with, for example, *talk about authorship*, contribute to the community's construction of the show's 'quality' which can act as a response to the negative connotations associated with television fandom. This chapter traces how fans' diverse textual interpretations in the Sopranoland Forum led to the group's tendency to divide into two separate, self-identified fan 'camps'. Taking into account the emphasis of the second research area, which focuses on the unique conditions of the Internet as a cultural site for social interaction, I also provide an introductory background overview of the ways in which fan identities and hierarchical roles are established in the two groups. An investigation of how fan performance reflects fan status is crucial in this discussion. My own performance of fan and scholarly 'status' is considered both in this chapter and in Chapter 7.

6.1 FAMILY STRUGGLES: EVALUATING TONY

6.1.1 Negotiating between the masculine and feminine

The textual tensions between the masculine, rational narratives associated with the public space of business and labour, and the feminine, emotional concerns associated with the domestic private sphere, were restaged as prominent themes in both Sopranoland Forum's interactions and in Season Five weekly post episode chats. Across several Episode 12 Discussion topic threads in the sample, fans disagreed about whether Season Five's finale or Season Six should focus more on various levels of Tony Soprano's emotional development, for example, through more therapy sessions with Dr. Melfi, or if the narrative should leave Melfi behind and resolve the high action related story-lines revolving around Tony's difficult role as Mob boss. Some argued that it was not the tension between Tony and Carmela or Tony and Melfi, but the conflict between the New Jersey and New York Mob families that was the strength of the show. Many thus hoped for or predicted Season Five's final resolution in terms of dramatic gangster style action. This stress on the syntagmatic or 'goal oriented narrative structures' has been associated with more masculine textual features such as those found in the gangster genre or the

television action series (Nelson 1997: 33, citing Fiske 1987: 144; see also Creeber 2002: 129). This preference was echoed when one member declared that despite the merits of the previous episode 'The Test Dream' with its layered 'symbolism', 'the violence in episodes like this is the main draw for about 95% of its viewers' (Civilian: posts 21; May 24, 2004). Another fan supported this statement by describing 'The Test Dream' as 'filler material' with therapy sessions never matching up to the intensity of drama in 'the Mafia material' (Newcomer: posts 14; May 25, 2004). One contributor who prioritised the Mob war storyline over Tony's domestic problems sought to examine the finer nuances of character interactions and plot developments, thus predicting that the war between Tony and Johnny Sack would not be resolved with violence. Alternatively, the show's writers would consciously exploit the relationship as a strategy that would act as 'one of the main draws for luring us back' (Civilian: posts 63; May 24, 2004). Another gave up any attempts to predict the series' outcome when expressing a similar loyalty toward the authority of authorship, noting such efforts were futile when 'these fellas are pretty darn good at making a very unpredictable show' (Newcomer: posts, 8; May 24, 2004).

Many interpretations of Tony's complex character recognised him as largely constructed through the codes and conventions of the American gangster genre. Certain debates centred on these generic expectations, questioning opposing predictions that Tony would 'go soft' and avoid a Mob war by repairing his marriage with the conflicted Carmela and choosing a moral life with his domestic 'family', or if he would continue to take the dangerous, immoral path and choose his Mob 'family'. When debates concerning Christopher's relationship to Tony were introduced, any notion of a clear boundary that would separate Tony's two families dissipated. Disagreements relating to Christopher, described ambiguously in the series as both 'cousin' and 'nephew' to Tony, often devoted attention to the intensity of the tumultuous relationship between the two men. In these areas some fans' pleasures around the subject of intimacy were not found in the area of romance with the women in these men's lives, but were located within discussions about male affection, commitment, trust and loyalty. This inclination was also suggested, ironically, within what many of these posters saw as contentious theories regarding the ways Tony would opt out of the Mob which ranged from the possibility of him 'flipping' (giving himself up to the FBI and going into witness protection with Carmela, Meadow and AJ), or going into hiding in the countryside with his two cousins, Tony B and Christopher. Characters Tony B and Christopher, therefore, became equally important intimate figures next to Tony's more immediate nuclear family. Various disagreements about Tony 'flipping', in addition to debates about the possible representation of the Mob war, also provided fans on both sides of the argument with the opportunity to exchange and compete over their knowledges of extratextual resources concerning 'real' mafia related figures which have contributed to the gangster film's appeal to cultural verisimilitude and mafia mythology (Neale 1990: 47). For some, the 'true' story upon which the film *Goodfellas* was based, became a viable source to

support plausible 'flipping' theories. For others, *The Godfather* films and other historical reports of gangster wars became sources to support alternative theories. Another fan, however, again emphasised the mastery of authorship by arguing against 'this incomprehensible practice', stating that it undermined Chase's ability to be completely original in his conscious avoidance of 'old mob-movie greats' (Big Goomba: posts 179; May 30, 2004).

Like Jenkins's (1995) observations of the *Twin Peaks'* Net fans, a significant number of fans situated their pleasures more firmly around the text's paradigmatic structure and feminine features often associated with serial television drama and the soap opera. Those whose discourse explicitly prioritised intimate character development over gangster style action, supplemented their knowledge of the gangster genre with their knowledge of melodramatic serial conventions to predict Tony's future motivations. In this respect, these viewers' relationship to *The Sopranos* reflects Allen's (1985: 70) assertion that the experienced reader of the soap opera 'is watchful for the paradigmatic strands that bind the community of characters together and the sometimes glacially slow but far more significant alterations in this network'. The slow pace and often 'interepisodic redundancy' of the soap opera allows the viewer to discover that the 'who' of the character is as important 'as what he or she "does" in the syntagmatic sense' (*ibid.*). While there was certainly evidence that members who claimed their preference for Mob style action also examined 'the who' of characters such as Christopher and Tony, they usually avoided discussing the narrative contribution of key female characters associated with these men. Debates were hence generally directed towards attempting to understand the male characters' status in the Mob family and their role in the potential war.

The subject of therapy, as a vehicle that would facilitate Tony's moral reform, was the key area that emphasised other fans' preference for the narrative emphasis on domestic concerns, personal relationships and talk, slower narrative pace and more open-ended possibilities (see Harrington & Bielby 1995: 15). Although the claims of these predictions still reflected the genre's realistic framework, using textual and extratextual evidence for support, the subject of Tony's emotional health was prioritised. Opponents argued these perspectives were unrealistic, implausible, and irrational, hence implicitly judging the quality of the predictions as well as the show's quality. However, unlike previous studies involving female fans of popular television texts (Ang 1985; Jenkins 1992; Baym 2000), these members did not identify with the emotional realism[140] of the therapeutic experience, nor did they personalise Tony's, or many other characters', inner struggles (see also Jenkins 1995). Rather, for some whose discourse centred on the war storyline, playful suggestions were proposed about what they would do if they held

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[140] Ang (1985: 36) argued that some letter writers in her study of *Dallas* fans claimed to dislike the show because it did not meet the expectations of empiricist realism, a concept that 'often fulfils an ideological function in television criticism in so far as its standards are used to furnish arguments for criticizing programmes and to strengthen the concept itself'. *Dallas* therefore was viewed by some as 'bad' because it did not present a realistic view of social reality (*ibid.*). Ang asserted however, that viewers accepted the plausibility of the series' emotional situations and struggles. Hence the show offered them the pleasures of 'emotional realism'.

the 'Capo' Mob-boss post within the diegesis. This mode of discourse coded *character identification*, occurring in only 16 instances across all Week 12 postings in Sopranoland Forum, can also be understood as relating to one's fantasised pleasure in 'watching how Tony handles being a leader', a theme that was identified more explicitly by one male fan during a post episode chat. For this fan, who also claimed a love of Mob films and *The Sopranos'* Mob plot developments, the difficulties and moral challenges of Tony's business decisions were not restricted to the codes of the genre but related to the wider realities of men in 'any field of work' (March 14, 2004).[141]

Although close identification with characters and *personalisation* of episode moments or themes was not wholly absent in the site throughout my participation, *critical apprehension of genre/text* was generally more supported overall, and dominated fan interactions during this heavy posting week. For example, one apparently newer female member drew on personal experience to sympathise with Carmela in her evaluation of Tony's problems with infidelity. The poster confessed to being 'born into the (Mob) life', and thus claimed personally to experience its 'benefits' and the pain of its 'sacrifices' (Newcomer: posts 5; May 27, 2004). The next poster's reply was abrupt, beginning with a negative address to the poster as 'woman':

> Jesus woman, "..those who are not in the life.." - In my experience if someone comes onto a public forum and starts going off on how they are "in the business" and all that bollox, I just want to laugh and turn my screen off.
>
> Do me a favour and dont post here.
>
> (Newcomer: posts 4; June 6, 2004)[142]

While this response might reflect the poster's doubt that the other member could, in real life, be that close to the narrative space of the fiction, the implicit criticism of this form of personalisation as a 'feminised' interpretative practice is enough to silence any future 'sharing' attempts. It may not seem surprising then that only one other poster, for example (the only member to sign posts with her offline name), drew explicitly on her personal experience of domestic violence in her lengthy disagreeing post that a woman like Adriana would not go on the run from the mafia (or an abusive man) without packing her designer brand 'Jimmy Choos'. One brief response applauded the poster only for making 'sense' in her critical evaluation of the sequence, while the moderator simply replied 'Thank you [Name withheld]...' (Capo: posts 906; May 30, 2004).

I have repeatedly turned to postings such as the one below, which set an early tone for lengthy disagreements throughout various threads in the sample, in order to explore the complex

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[141] See, for example, Lacey's (2002: 102) analysis of interviews with a small group of male British *Sopranos* viewers who made more direct 'empathetic identification' with Tony Soprano (*ibid.*).
[142] Although this poster's status is identified as 'Newcomer', the member self-identified in another thread as a previous active poster with a slightly different user name in the old Sopranoland message boards.

discursive work that took place as some fans attempted to negotiate their 'feminised' textual pleasures in the context of forum interaction:

> I give it a B
>
> I'm the only one who feels this way, apparently, but the episode was a bit of a letdown after the incredible Test Dream. Of course, a lot of things would be a let down after that ep. The most disappointing thing was that there was no follow up with Melfi. She's been out for two episodes in a row (not counting the stroll through the plaza lobby), and I'm crying out for Tony to unload the stuff in his dream on her so she can help him at least acknowledge the urgent messages his unconscious is sending him.
>
> My complaint is really just a matter of what they decided to resolve or depict in this ep -- pacing issues in the story arcs -- and not on the manner the depiction was handled. In terms of execution, it was almost flawless. The Ade/Chris scenes were excrutiating to watch, and Michael Imperioli was particularly superb
>
> The Tony/Johnny Sac scenes are always top shelf, and they were riveting again last night. Everyone appreciates Gandolfini, but Vincent Curatola is as consistently good as any of the supporting actors on the show.
>
> Also disappointing was the Tony/Carmela "reunion." I know the idea is that it wasn't REALLY a reunion, just a business deal. And I still believe a proper reunion, one built on passion and not convenience, good meals, or material benefits, is coming.
>
> But with only a single episode left, it feels like there just won't be time to do it right, especially since I believe Carmela is a goner and especially since there is still so much mob stuff to deal with. I will be absolutely disappointed if the finale is dominated by fallout from the Leotardo/Tony B stuff. We are owed another therapy scene the equal of the one in Unidentified Black Males, this one devoted to that dream and all the morality, conscience issues tugging at Tony.
>
> I know in a NY Times interview this year, Chase was asked to give an example of the kind of thing you get on the Sopranos that he likes that you wouldn't get on another show, and he said "a 12-minute therapy scene." The one in UBM was around 7-8 minutes, and it's the longest single therapy scene I can remember, so I don't know if that's the one he meant or whether there is one in the finale that's actually 12 minutes. If there is, all will be forgiven for the Melfi omission this ep, because I''m sure any scene that takes 12 minutes to play out on this show is extraordinary.
>
> (Capo: posts 506; May 24, 2004)

After a string of 119 overwhelmingly positive episode reviews, this poster was the first to disagree and rate the episode as less than excellent. The critique of Melfi's narrative absence, which the poster acknowledges is unique and may therefore invite dispute, is mitigated with the following qualification 'My complaint is really just a matter of' in the second paragraph. The qualification enables the poster to soften any threat by shifting from *narrative talk* to the *critical aesthetic evaluation* mode, thus briefly taking attention away from emotional investment with

character. The next two paragraphs, however, are devoted to critiques with subjective suggestions that narrative should attend to the theme of romance as well as Tony's vulnerability. The post then ends with a more highly modalised utterance in which the appeal to 'authorship', also functioning to confirm a discourse of quality with its *hierarchical generic comparison*, allows the poster to return to the significance of Melfi's role. At the same time, considering the poster's concentration on production processes, *characterisation* is framed within the *critical aesthetic evaluation* mode.

The shifts in this post can be understood as performing different degrees of discursive work. On one level the poster attempts to negotiate feminine pleasures of the text with fan pleasures that celebrate distance and encourage critique. The final, assertive appeal to *extratextual orientation* and *authorship*, as validation of the poster's focus on the text's feminine characteristics, it can be argued, is consistent with Fairclough's (1992: 160, citing Hodge and Kress 1988: 123) contention that a speaker's high affinity with a proposition may be a way of expressing solidarity with the addressee/s. In this respect, 'expressing high affinity may have little to do with one's commitment to a proposition, but a lot to do with a desire to show solidarity'. Fan devotion to a TV show's creator 'auteur' has been observed in other fan studies (see Jenkins 1995; Hills 2002; Hills 2004a; Cantwell 2004). Throughout my participant-observation in various *Sopranos'* fan message boards, including the Yahoo! SopranosForum, I frequently noticed that expressions of devotion and loyalty to David Chase resembled the 'neoreligiosity' Hills (2002:117) identifies in many cult fandoms (consider one Sopranoland Forum member's username: 'chaseisgod'), and which he argues characterises the discursive defence mechanisms fans use to ward off the cultural stigmatisation against fandom (see my discussion in Chapter 1). In this sample, 'Review' posts arriving before the one above referred to authorship more generally, using terms such as 'HBO' or 'they' to question authors' future intentions, to admire clever narrative twists and surprises, or, in one case, in the context of a plea to writers to kill off an unliked character. While three previous posters referred specifically to David Chase's remarkable ability to 'pull off' a great episode (even though Terence Winter wrote the episode and Tim Van Patten directed it), the above poster was the first to draw on Chase to support an oppositional critique. The context within which the latter utterance above is located, and others like it, suggests that such tendencies to elevate the author may justify 'fans' fascination with the soap opera dimensions of the series, providing a high culture rationale for their preoccupation with what is, after all, "only a television program" ' (Jenkins 1995: 61). If a fan can provide evidence that the auteur under-emphasises cinematic aesthetics in order to exploit the themes and aesthetics of the small screen (see Creeber 2002: 127, citing Newcomb 1974: 263-264) while, ironically, producing a series that distinguishes itself from average TV, their position is less likely to be doubted by the majority in this male/female group (or, by implication, the wider non-fan culture). Of course, this discourse of 'auteurism' is not only generated within the confines of the community, but is also constructed, Hills (2002: 133) notes, 'prior' to their

reception through 'official extratextual/publicity narrative', hence inevitably providing fans with a 'frame of reference' for producing meaning (*ibid.*). The work of this discourse therefore extends a long way, Hills adds, bringing with it 'an ideology of quality' to the largely unauthored, formulaic domain of mass culture (*ibid.*).

The tendency for fans to move between modes of discourse and degrees of modality within one post also points to the complexities of articulating the viewing experience or one's affective relationship to the text. Looking at the above post this way opens up a discussion about the playful nature of fan activity. In particular, *extratextual orientation* and *talk about authorship* can serve other interpretative purposes and can be understood as 'intrinsically [relating] to the textual, to the viewing experience itself', as Cantwell (2004) has emphasised. Cantwell argues that when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* online fans appeal to their knowledge about the show's writers and specific styles of authorship, they develop their personal understanding about their likes and dislikes of the season, 'and thus what constitutes 'good Buffy'' (*ibid.*). In the case of *Buffy* fan discourse surrounding the subject of spoilers, Cantwell suggests that fans' avoidance of extratextual information allows them the 'distance' they deem necessary to engage more intensely with the immediacy of the viewing experience. Similarly, fans' engagement with privileged spoiler knowledge distances them from the immediacy of first viewing yet allows them more involvement with the show. The contradictory aspect of 'distancing' is thus interpreted as a fan practice that can 'enhance intense experience' and is a feature that is also articulated in the text's diegesis. 'BtVS often draws back from being fully embroiled in passion, and in doing so allows this passion to occur' (*ibid.*). With respect to this notion of distance or detachment, some parallels of fan intensification of the text can also be identified in the above example as well as in both forums' spoilers threads, which I explore in Chapter 7. *The Sopranos* is also a text that offers viewers a fair share of emotional intensity, in particular in its complex representation of Tony's slow and painful path of self-discovery. At the same time, just when the viewer believes *The Sopranos'* characters will arrive at their prospective points of moral revelation, the text pulls away from private feelings (or 'withholds' this information[143]) and returns to an outer world dominated by rationalisation, the suppression of intimacy, high action and violence. The intimate and the brutal therefore frequently intersect in this fictional realm, hence striking a delicate balancing act which adds to the drama's and viewers' intensity of experience. In this sense, like other media cult texts, *The Sopranos'* diegesis articulates the ongoing conflict between public 'rational' discourses and private self -knowledge, or 'issues of 'epistemological eclipse' and 'ontological operation'' (Hills 2002: 137). The sometimes contradictory nature of fan responses, with their tendency to integrate both emotional/subjective as well as critical or 'detached' discourse, can also be said to relate directly to these textual

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[143] I refer here to Hills's (2002: 193) note 'that cult texts are marked by textual absences and the withholding of information which does not simply allow for an 'exchange' of meaning, but which instead calls certain fan affective-interpretive strategies into being'.

tensions, which always act as invitations for multiple readings and diverse performances of audiencehood.

Although the formal conditions of *The Sopranos* invite these complex responses, the articulation of some interpretative perspectives, as I have suggested, may arise from more predominantly gender inflected subject positions. In combination with the discourse of auteurism, gendered engagements with the text can result in intra-fandom 'struggles over genre distinctions' (Jancovich 2000: 26) and contestations over the cultural value of some genres compared to others. As Jenkins (2002: 162) notes, while some groups can successfully negotiate such differences, others struggle to welcome the diverse play with meanings, leaving many heavily divided or resulting in individuals splintering off to form new groups. The intensity of an individual's emotional engagement with the fan object's textual features and extratextual narratives is hence always in negotiation with 'performance' when this response is shared with, to borrow Lovell's phrase, 'a very large cast of others' (Lovell 2003: 2) who act as both willing audience and willing fellow performers, as I have explored in Chapter 1. The principles of Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism, as my focus on discourse has implied (and Fairclough's emphasis on intertextual analysis makes explicit [see 1995: 188]), stresses that speech acts are always shaped through an individual's relationship with a variety of texts and interactions with others. As Lynn Pearce (1994: 2) summarises, 'central to the dialogic philosophy of the Bakhtin group, and present in their discussions of language, literature and human subjectivity, is a recognition of the impossibility of saying, meaning or, indeed, being, without the reciprocating presence of an addressee'. Although dialogue, for Bakhtin, ''is a two-sided act' (between speaker and addressee)', Pearce observes, that dialogues exist beyond this intimate dynamic as they are '*often* made in the presence of more than two persons' (*ibid.*: 117). One's performance of fan identity, when shared with others, is therefore highly influenced by the group's communal meta-textual readings, the 'ideal' version of the text (eg. 'good Buffy') that is constructed by the norms of the fan community (see Baym 2000: 158-159; and Jenkins 1992: 98).

While I do not claim an interest in discovering the 'authentic' offline gendered identities of the two *Sopranos* forums' memberships, it is important to address how the adoption or performance of certain subject positions (although this may not always be restricted to gender as further examples illustrate), which may inform fans' intensity of experience or their own dialogue with the series, might be valued within the hierarchical structures of the fan community. The communal investment in and legitimation of some fan practices over others, as noted above, therefore can also be understood as a form of discursive justification for the community's affective intensity to their object of fandom, as Hills (2002: 67) has emphasised and Jancovich's (2000) work on horror fans has suggested. Extending the emphasis on fan performance and fan performativity, I will explore, in the following sections, how the communal restaging of narrative tensions (proximity vs. distance; emotional vs. rational) can be understood as a

meaningful social and public act that 'does' something in the Austinian sense. If the process of dialogic interaction enables social subjects to negotiate difference (Pearce 1994: 119) then the discursive work and struggles played out by fans has implications for how they self-reflexively manage their culturally marginalised social status as fans.

6.2 ESTABLISHING A SENSE OF SELF, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

My discussion above began to explore how one's intensive experience of the object of fandom intersects with other texts, including those that are constructed within the space of the online forum. In order for a group to perform its unique identity and to construct itself as 'community', it must rely on the individual voices and continuity of its regular participants. Baym (2000) devotes a chapter to exploring the specific CMC practices that inform the development of r.a.t.s.' individual members' identities. Although Baym accepts that a large number of the group's membership maintain the lurker/reader only status, it is the more active, heavier posters who set the tone for group expectations and norms of behaviour (*ibid.*: 144). While turning attention to posters with highly developed group personas may suggest a scholarly overemphasis on fan 'production'[144], hence potentially reproducing a moral dualism, tracing the processes through which fans may acquire their identity, recognition and status within a group's social hierarchy can be a useful way of exploring how they negotiate the terms of community and 'the meaning and relevance that being a fan has in their lives' (Harrington & Bielby 1995: 6). Before I attempt to investigate these issues as they pertain to the two *Sopranos* groups under study, it is useful to question some of Baym's approach which tends to underemphasise the role of power relations and social hierarchies in the r.a.t.s. community.

Baym's focus on one 'exemplary heavy poster' 'Ann', whose frequent 'personal and cheery affection for the others' is likely to form the basis for the group's 'friendliness ethic' (2000: 146), tends to highlight her over-celebration of the positive features of r.a.t.s.. Baym does attempt to counter this emphasis in the later chapter 'Futureflash: 5 Years Later' however, her earlier presentation of empirical material, in particular, largely accepts fans' statements as transparent accounts of truth. Hills (2001b: 117) has suggested that this tendency in Baym's work overlooks a more complex Bakhtinian investigation of a speaker's use of the term 'community', and, by implication, the group's performance of community. He argues, for example, that one respondent's account of online friendships as 'strange', because they are not conducted in face-to-face settings, is accepted by Baym as an expression of the person's 'real' 'feelings' 'rather than being considered as instances of heteroglossia, in which 'strangeness'

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[144] Baym (2000: 146) adds that heavy r.a.t.s.' posters were also more likely to respond to questionnaires. These posters were also the only ones other respondents mentioned by name in their questionnaires. This observation highlights the difficult nature of conducting this type of research, which can, at best, only generate its conclusions by collecting data from visible, willing respondents. The role of the unobservable lurker, as Hine (2000: 25) asserts, can hence often be easily sidelined, resulting in an ethnographic narrative that 'enhances the perception of the newsgroup as a coherent bounded entity'.

might appear *not* because online community actually feels 'strange', but because it appears to conflict with (still dominant?) discursive norms of geographical 'community'' (Hills 2001b: 117-118, emphasis in original). While Baym rightly acknowledges, drawing on Bakhtin's ideas of dialogic interaction and heteroglossic discourse, that strong 'welcoming', witty and humorous personalities set the tone for others' performances, and hence assist in affirming others' identities in the group, she under-explores in the earlier chapters any possibilities that could indicate degrees of discursive struggle which may result in some fans' choice to remain invisible. The question of what may lie, for example, behind the utterances of two self-confessed lurkers who report in their questionnaire that they lurk 'because i feel that my POV [point of view] is just what someone else said, and I don't want to waste bandwidth just to say "me too"', and 'because I don't have the time to spend writing long, amusing letters about all this' (Baym 2000: 144-145) is quickly sidelined in favour of presenting more quantitative data results for variations in members' very light, light and heavy posting activity. This leads to the more obvious, repetitive conclusion that r.a.t.s.' frequent participants are the most recognisable characters in the group. The possibility that others may indeed experience inadequacy or embarrassment about their perceived inability to match up to the expertise of those friendly others, that these feelings might have emerged after failed attempts at forum communication, or indeed that some members may simply struggle to find the correct language to articulate in the form of a questionnaire their unease about participating in the public sphere of organised fan activity, is left untouched.

In short, Baym does not appear to accept the challenging task of addressing the meaningful ways in which individuals may speak when they are 'not' speaking (Mazzei 2003: 356). As noted above, her later chapter considers how the group's power dynamics can cause disharmony however, the text reverts to the same problem Hills signals in his review. Baym summarises that r.a.t.s. is still the community it once was, 'for the most part', with the word 'community', according to the respondents of her survey, 'still' defining the group's activities. It is, however, she adds, a more 'complicated community than it once was' (Baym 2000: 196). What is questionable is Baym's unchallenged acceptance of another respondent's claim that 'It's becoming less like 'Happy Valley' and more like 'East L.A.!'' (*ibid.*). This is a statement which she draws upon to create the subtitle for the section 'From Village to City' in order to describe the 'new' r.a.t.s. community. Here the traditional, small, cosy 'Happy Valley' 'village' community is constructed as 'good' against the bigger, traffic bound and more diverse 'complicated' 'East L.A.' 'bad' 'city'. Baym's implied willingness to adopt these terms suggests that she too repeats the respondent's creation of the moral dualism of the 'good', previous community against the 'bad' other, present community.

6.3 ADDRESSING THE QUESTION OF SILENCES

My criticism of Baym's 'silences' in the area of difficult subject matter[145] echoes Barker and Brooks's (1998) challenge to Liebes and Katz's (1993) lack of attendance to certain types of audience response which may be more difficult to identify or conduct a thorough investigation of, through quantitative analyses. They argue that problems are introduced in research accounts when scholars over rely on 'frequency' or repetition of different kinds of talk without explaining 'why frequency should count as any kind of proof of the salience of certain reactions to a cultural group' (Barker & Brooks 1998: 97). 'Without frequency to rely on', they add, 'analysis is much more complicated' (*ibid.*: 98). Fairclough also argues that attending to absences in texts is as important in discourse analysis as is the identification of textual presences (1995: 5 & 210). Absences or silences are often created in interpretative communities, including the ones that comprise the academic canon, when sensitive or difficult subject matter arise. Some of the fan discourse in interaction I introduced above and will address in the sections that follow, as well as my own account of discursive participation in the 'field', begins to illustrate the ambivalences or silences that typify what Fairclough calls 'classic defence mechanisms' (Fairclough 1992: 157). These defensive discursive strategies often occur in unequal encounters, and can potentially result in the eliciting of specific forms of interaction over others. Power dynamics and moral dualisms may thus be reinforced by fans themselves as well as by the scholar-fan in the research narrative where these encounters may be potentially repressed.

In my attempt to work through some of these concerns, I want first to return to the question of community identity by examining how the technological and social conditions of both forums contributed to the construction of the two groups' ethos, their social hierarchies, and individual members' identities. This material provides a background for the discussion in Chapter 7, which investigates the contexts of interaction that tended to close down possibilities in some areas of fan discourse that occurred 'infrequently' throughout the data corpus, such as *ideological, moral frameworks*, and *emotional utterances*. The latter part of Chapter 7 and the Conclusions chapter will open a space from which to consider how the competitive, hierarchical nature of online fandom may affect an individual's decision to engage in the public activities associated with organised fandom.

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[145] Hills (2001b: 118) argues that Baym's silences in her account of r.a.t.s. are likely to result from her hesitancy to question the community's ideals which may cause members 'to react defensively and/or to view Baym's survey as an intrusive activity'. See also Jenkins's (Hills & Jenkins 2001) own self-critique of the construction of similar potential silences such as the research accounts that were often rendered invisible in *Textual Poachers* (1992).

6.4 FAN IDENTITIES AND HIERARCHIES

My observations of both forums identified fan hierarchies that are consistent with some of those examined by MacDonald (1998: 136).[146] MacDonald writes that the online female fans of the US series *Quantam Leap* she studied may occupy the following hierarchical positions simultaneously: 'knowledge, level of fandom, access to "inside" knowledge, leaders, and control of venue' (*ibid.*: 136). 'Hierarchy of knowledge' is determined by the level of one's knowledge of the fictional universe of the text. 'Hierarchy of Fandom Level, or Quality' is the distinction made by the amount of participation in conventions or organised events to which a fan is committed. The 'quality' of this participation is determined by the type of event, whether it is supported commercially by the TV industry or is fan led. Unlike some other fandoms, attendance at industry conventions for the *Quantum Leap* fans 'serves as a badge of honor' (*ibid.*). 'Hierarchy of Access' indicates the value placed on fans' 'direct access to actors, producers of the show, production personnel, and in some rare cases actual shootings of episodes' (*ibid.*). 'Hierarchy of Leaders' describes the division of fandoms into smaller groups which 'can occur along geographic, fan interest, or friendship lines' (*ibid.*: 138). The leadership and follower roles (and hence the 'pecking order') that emerge in the new groups is recognised when small groups join larger ones at conventions. 'Hierarchy of Venue' describes the power a fan acquires when her home is used as the base for events or organisation. In online contexts, venues are controlled by those who are owners of email lists, MUDs, or initiators/moderators of chat rooms (*ibid.*). The 'new criterion' on which MacDonald places emphasis is 'technological competence and access' (*ibid.*: 139). Easy access and technical expertise in computer-mediated spaces allow some voices to be heard over others either by enabling more venue control or more control over the fictional universe through the exploitation of computer competencies.

I recognised that the creators of both forums largely performed their authority status through the levels 'Hierarchy of Access' and 'Hierarchy of Venue', and, by implication, through the technological competence that is required to maintain these levels. In both cases, these

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[146] MacDonald (1998: 136) cites Bacon-Smith's (1992) denial of fan hierarchies even though Bacon-Smith accepts that fans can split into groups. It is also worth noting Bacon-Smith's (1992: 94) observations around the much denigrated 'Mary Sue' genre of fan fiction writing, one which is characteristic of the 'neophyte fanwriters' (*ibid.* 96) who are in 'training' for fandom. More experienced fans' dismissal of the genre suggests that while many fan communities may strive to achieve an ideal consensus, the processes by which some fan voices are silenced indicate the reality of fandom's exclusionary power.
Jenkins's (1992: 80) account of 'fan gossip' in *Textual Poachers* also acknowledges that discussions can easily lead to 'heated disagreements about the relative merits of any given text or character' (1992: 95). However, Jenkins diverts attention from this issue when asserting that tensions were 'relatively rare' (*ibid.*), suggesting that fans were able to easily achieve consensus and continue in their collaborative 'meta-textual' endeavours, in spite of individual interpretative differences. Although Jenkins (1995: 59) does not offer a close examination of fans' 'heated' disputes in the *Twin Peaks'* net group, he draws attention to the potential power relations in online fandoms where 'knowledge equals prestige, reputation and power. Knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net, and so there is a compulsion to be first to circulate new information and to be the first to possess it.'

individuals posted infrequently in the forums,[147] yet were clearly recognised by others as the 'Boss' (in Sopranoland Forum) or the 'Capo' (in Yahoo! SopranosForum), who were capable of 'whacking' undesirable members. Although their distinction within these hierarchy levels cannot be divorced from their performances of knowledge of the series' fictional world, which certainly would have historically contributed to their prestige, the value they and others attached to their proximity to the media, popular press, actors and processes of production, appeared significantly to inform their group personas. Sopranoland Forum 'Boss' Ivy's acquired symbolic capital, for example, was far more visible outside the message boards. Ivy had sole responsibility for the construction and maintenance of the site's informative homepage, which provided links with a wealth of diverse information about the fandom and the show, including 'exclusive' Sopranoland interviews with actors.[148] The 'Publicity' link also contained archives for the many press, Internet, radio and TV accounts of Sopranoland.com and interviews with the webmistress who, one reporter writes, is 'deemed a Sopranos expert due to her fansite Sopranoland.com'.[149] Although since moving the message boards to the ezboard network, the webmistress delegated moderating responsibilities to other high profile members, her position as the individual who 'speaks for' the many voices that comprise the forum to interested media parties remained intact.

My observations from the Yahoo! SopranosForum also indicated that the founder and key moderator contributed less to weekly episode discussions in Season Five, yet was more likely to intervene when questions or conflict over netiquette arose. Another way this individual's role was affirmed in the group was through more frequent posting of extratextual material, such as articles related to facts about the Italian-American Mafia or information related to events, the show's future production schedule or individual actors. Private email correspondence also indicated that this member placed a high value on his/her personal connection with a number of *Sopranos* actors, writers, and production personnel, some of whom were self-declared members of the group.[150] Much of this individual's time and effort was spent managing an informative *Sopranos* fansite outside of the forum as well as the website of a *Sopranos* actor, with whom he/she claimed to have developed a friendship. This forum creator's close, direct access to several aspects of the show's production processes was articulated in the forum, and appeared to set up the group's expectation of the continued expression of such exclusive knowledge,

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[147] This was more noticeable throughout my lengthy membership in Sopranoland Forum, and was less likely during my earlier participation in the Yahoo! group. However, as Season Five progressed, the Yahoo! SopranosForum's creator's posts were less frequent.

[148] I use the past tense here to make explicit the 'pastness' of this ethnographic account. However, recent visits to Sopranoland confirm that the site's homepage has not changed significantly, except for the updating of most recent information.

[149] Keene, J. (2004) 'Poizen promotes 'The Sopranos'', *Las Vegas City Life.* Cited in www.sopranoland.com. Accessed on October 20, 2006.

[150] Although the performance of this membership was not always apparent in messages, it became clear, for example, in an early post in the Week 12 sample, that the show's 'boom operator' was an active reader and poster, when he responded to another member's technical insights concerning the difference between the show's rigging crew and the shooting crew.

although disclosures of the series' future narrative events in the form of 'spoilers' were not the focus of this acquired status. This member's performance of proximity to the object of fandom was also equalled with the high value he/she placed on his/her connections to key players in other *Sopranos* fandoms. Although I never expressed an interest in making contact with any of the series' production personnel, I was warned that I should watch out for untrustworthy fans with high public profiles from other sites who might offer supposedly wrong insider information and mislead me in my research. The extensive investment in the construction of a unique, authentic fansite and discussion forum, heralded by an individual who is well-connected enough to secure the participation of some of the show's own production crew and cast, illustrates the kind of work fans engage in, in order to create territorial distinctions between groups that circulate around the same object of fandom. In spite of many fansites' common practice of providing links to other sites, thus fostering a sense of 'communal purpose' and 'connectedness' (Bailey 2005: 186), webpage owners will often present their site as 'the one' that contains the most exclusive up-to-date information on the show or as the forum with the most intelligent contributions. [151]

The input of each individual's distinctive contribution, as I have noted, remains crucial in maintaining a group's identity. Other highly visible members in the Yahoo! group, one of whom also took on a consistently strong role as communicator of extratextual information by posting topic related articles, openly welcomed me to the forum after I introduced myself. Another member appeared to adopt the role of spokesperson when he/she wrote: 'I hope you enjoy your time here. Feel free to post your thoughts on the show or related topics. It's a friendly Forum and thrives on discussion of differing opinions' (April 11, 2003). Upon reflection, I realise my own post, shortly after first joining, contributed to the construction of the group's ethos of friendliness and intolerance of trolling or abusive behaviour, [152] as I finalised my message with, 'I am looking forward to participating after witnessing much flaming in other Sopranos' forums' (April 10, 2003). In wishing to gain the recognition of others as well as invite a dialogue on the common occurrence of flaming[153], in the name of 'research', I appeared to participate in the same value systems I described above that tend to divide fans and fan groups.[154] Some posters' response to my early curiosity about the prevalence of *Sopranos'* fan

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[151] See also Hine's (2000: 105) observations surrounding the web developers concerned with the Louise Woodward case. Hine argues that in spite of suggestions 'that the web is aspatial' in its complex ability to link users to destinations which lack definite 'clues to physical location at which documents are stored', the WWW is experienced as a highly spatial place, with web developers seeing 'sites as their own territory, giving them rights and responsibilities'.

[152] Trolling is a term used to describe someone who deliberately enters a group to cause disturbance. (See Baym 2000: 187). This ethos was articulated in the 'Welcome to SOPRANOSFORUM' email I received which included the forum rules.

[153] Flaming often accompanies trolling when aggressive messages are posted.

[154] Replies from prominent posters indicated that flaming happened in other groups but not theirs, which was a well moderated forum. One member pondered, however, as I had, whether flaming was something that just happened because of the diversity of virtual community memberships, or if the textual form of *The Sopranos* 'encourages that sort of action in the members of these sites' (April 10, 2003).

fiction writing also provided them with the opportunity to affirm their unique identities as writers of the genre in a fandom where the practice is, in relation to other TV fan cultures, far less abundant, and in some *Sopranos* groups, often disavowed.[155] Other posters' noticeable regular lengthy modes of response in episode discussions, which often drew on *broad referential frameworks*, signalled their high cultural capital in terms of their skilful writing styles and their extensive knowledge of wider cultural contexts. On the other hand, one poster, in particular, developed a recognisable and acceptable persona as the witty member who posted brief one, two or three line messages. Two others created their distinction as the 'Aussies' of the group. I will later address how this assertion of national identity resulted in negative consequences for one of the members. The common newsgroup norm of members signing posts with their offline names (many adding both forename and surname), referring to other members by name, the use of low modality phrases and mitigating devices, and the gradual disclosure of aspects of their offline selves, generated the feeling that these active members felt it was important to maintain a strong sense of mutual respect that is often associated with the term 'community'.

Although the use of 'signature files' is also common in Yahoo! groups, the majority of these Yahoo! SopranosForum posters did not appear to employ them. Baym's (2000) study highlights the common practice of self-disclosure in the r.a.t.s. group and attributes this to members' 'personalization of the soap', noting that it is also a means 'to promote the interpersonal atmosphere' (*ibid.*: 152). While one regular Yahoo! SopranosForum member's proud self-disclosure that she 'majored in psychology in college' which enabled her to 'have an insight in on the minds of the Sopranos characters' and could thus assist others if they had 'trouble in disecting some of the material' (April 27, 2003) might have invited public dissonance as a rebuttal to the fan's performance of self as owner of high educational capital in relation to the assumed less knowledgeable others, it was surprising to me that other members did not respond negatively. The quite obvious lack of response, however, certainly illustrates how polite silences may function to sustain the appearance of the group's harmony.

It is impossible to document the development of individual identities and group hierarchies without addressing how my own identity was acknowledged. Like the two regular Australian contributors, I appeared to be the only other active participant, at least during the time of the fieldwork, from outside the US. I will return to how this impacted upon my experience of participation in the two forums in Chapter 7. By Week 5 of the fieldwork, the Yahoo! SopranosForum founder sent a post titled, 'Extra Moderators Brought Online'. In addition to the mention of a film director, who previously assisted in organising online chats with two of the

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[155] Consider, for example, the small number of *Sopranos* fan fiction entries (60) listed in the website Fanfiction.net, compared to the thousands listed under *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (29,927), *X Files* (6,196), or *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1,293). I consider the implications of the 'disavowal' of *Sopranos* related fan fiction in the Conclusions chapter. See www.fanfiction.net. Accessed June 6, 2006.

show's actors, and two other regular contributors, I was added to this exclusive list. This privilege, it appeared, was accorded mainly because of my own unique position in the group as the academic researcher. The announcement read: 'Jeannette Monaco in the UK is now a moderator. Anyone going for a PHD that is related to what we are interested in as a group should at least have this position' (April 7, 2004). My initial response was one of surprise, as I did not feel I could accept this special status, given the responsibility of moderating or censuring discussions when I felt obliged to try to maintain some level of 'distance' that is meant to accompany the role of the 'objective' researcher. At the same time, I felt I could not refuse the title as this Capo had welcomed my presence in the group and valued academic research as highly as the other cultural domains mentioned. Although I felt embarrassed, as I did not quite know what to 'do' with a title I felt I had not earned (in fact I did nothing but carried on as usual), I also felt, as any other member might, a certain degree of pleasure in knowing I was recognised. Of course, the announcement implied that this recognition did not result from my outstanding contributions as a 'fan' but through my stated academic status, hence, my pleasure was largely connected to my research desires. In short, I secretly hoped that the Capo's announcement would further legitimate my role to others whom I desired to 'access'.[156]

Unlike the Yahoo! SopranosForum, where the use of offline names was common practice, members in Sopranoland Forum engaged in more playful styles of self-presentation. In the old Sopranoland message boards I felt distinctly out of place when I registered my username as my first initial and surname, when the majority of other members exhibited more distinctive performances of self in relation to the formal features of *The Sopranos'* text (BakedZiti, Sopranogirl, tonysoprano555, BadaBingBubba, The Don, FlyOnMelfi'sWall) or the series' extratextual narratives (Gotti, HBOAficionado, chaseisgod). Others simply adopted more unusual or ambiguous user names (Rightfielder21, mrmuddywaters, Wissy, BeatleBarb), which they may have used in other areas of the WWW, and many added photos or avatars to signal an online identity (a feature that was not available in the previous Sopranoland forum). When I registered for the new message boards I made the decision to construct a name that would fit the dominant style of interaction while also indicating my personal fan interests. As more than a few other members chose names that indicated an interest in Carmela Soprano, one of my more

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[156] Consider, for example, Hills's (Hills & Jenkins 2001) observation that within some fan cultures academic knowledge may not be accepted as 'superior' but 'may well be devalued, or even sneered at'. This is countered with Jenkins's reflection about his discomfort with the high authority status attributed to him by the fan community after the publication of *Textual Poachers* (*ibid.*). The de-legitimising of academic interest in fan cultures, however, can shift the balance of power in favour of the research participants, thus challenging the academic's 'own sense of centrality or cultural hierarchy' (*ibid.*). Although, I was 'rationally' aware at that moment that this supported sense of academic authority felt uncomfortable and hence was morally problematic for me and for the research, it did not stop me from wishing this recognition might help the project along. However, while it seemed reassuring that the group's founder validated academic contributions to the study of fandom (this was illustrated further in his/her webpage which published an academic internet essay about fandom) this sense of security was soon abolished when so few members of the group kept contact with me or responded to a list of questions (including this Capo) I posted after the close of Season Five.

favoured characters, I chose 'Madonna' because of its Italian-Catholic connotations and because it defined my other fan attachment to the pop star Madonna. [157]

As I signalled in Chapter 5, Sopranoland Forum's choice to switch to the ezboard network community was a technological move that encouraged members to appropriate and restage the power themes of *The Sopranos'* narrative while earning their hierarchical statuses and affirming their identity in the fandom.[158] In an early 'Welcome' thread titled 'Membership Levels: How to Move Up in Our Family' the webmistress wrote:

> By actively participating in the Sopranoland Forum, you will gradually and automatically increase your status in This Thing of Ours. But as Christopher Moltisanti found out, you have to do a lot to prove you're worthy of being made!'[159]

'Newcomer' status is the lowest in the hierarchy with a limit of 5 posts per day. After acquiring 20 posts, Newcomers can move up to 'Civilian' status, yet are limited to 10 daily posts. In order to move up to 'Goomba' status, members need 75 posts and are limited to 15 posts per day. Acquiring 125 posts earns the member the status of 'Big Goomba' which has no restrictions on daily posting privileges. The same is true for 'Associates' who acquire 200 posts, and 'Soldiers' who acquire 300 posts. The features of the ezboard network further facilitate this training for good fan performance through an official 'rating' system. This means that the quality of a fan's 'performance', a term the site itself employed, is rated by other members with voting polls. As another moderator later wrote in the 'Welcome' thread: 'Family members can rate your topic performance, so do good!' 'Soldiers' who are deemed worthy can then be selected by the webmistress and be upgraded to 'Made Man', 'Capo' (moderator), or 'Consiglieri' (administrator) positions. With a special editing facility that allows members to return to and edit posts they have already sent and other features such as number of hits or 'views' per topic, one could argue that online fan performance largely coincides with the site's 'technological performance'.[160]

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[157] In Chapter 4 I explored Brunsdon's (2000) notion of the 'periodicity of identity',which I believe can be useful to consider again here. My earlier fan attachments to Madonna are significant as they occurred during the early 1980s when I embraced mainstream dance/club culture and popular feminist discourse, yet later struggled with this subject position when encountering more radical feminist politics amongst friends at University. However, in the years after undergraduate education I returned to the pleasures of Madonna's mainstream popular feminist appeal. After living in the UK for some time I also tended to see some reflection of myself in the public figure of the more 'mature' pop star who is close to my own age, and whose decision to reside mainly in the UK with her family had some personal meaning for me. The construction of this username therefore indicates multiple levels of my fan interests and cultural identity which are historically significant. See also Young (1988) for a useful discussion about feminism's discomfort with Madonna's 'Material Girl' post-feminist image.

[158] See also Hill and Calcutt's (2001) observations of the fan-site BuffyUK.org which utilises a similar playful system.

[159] Accessed on September 3, 2004.

[160] See for example Lancaster's (2001) critique about how some *Babylon 5* interactive CD-ROM games' ability to enhance user participation places a different emphasis on fan performance. McKenzie (2001) also offers a useful consideration of the relationship between technological performance and cultural performance.

Shortly after I registered I discovered that I had been quickly upgraded to 'Big-Goombaette' ,[161] even though the number of my posts in the new message boards did not reflect this status. The webmistress and other key players who initiated the new boards rewarded my and other older members' efforts when we supplied interest and feedback about some of the problems in the previous forum and what could help the future initiative. Previous members who later registered with new usernames were deemed 'Newcomers' early on, yet were clear to state, in an off-topic thread dedicated to the subject, who they were in the old setting. Additional off-topic threads that indicated an interest in facilitating a sense of community included these following subject titles: 'Where are you from?' [162]; 'What is Your Favourite Mob Related Movie', or 'Anyone like crime movies', 'What do you guys like to read?'. Members also enquired early in the fieldwork about obtaining missed episodes and non-US fans enquired about how to obtain Season Five episodes in order to participate in present discussions. I will discuss the outcome of this enquiry and its implications further in the latter part of Chapter 7. Although there appeared to be a slightly higher concentration of posts in a thread (from Week 9 to Week 12 of the fieldwork) containing feedback about how the moderators could better organise threads without deleting some members' messages, posts observed in off-topic threads were minimal, hardly occurring in double numbers, throughout the fieldwork and at other moments during the series' hiatus.[163] This suggests that episode discussion, focus on characters, favourite seasons, future predictions and spoilers, were the areas of contribution most valued and hence, those that most sustained this group's sense of identity and community.

The few Sopranoland Forum members who offered me details in private exchange about their experiences and expectations of Sopranoland, suggested that the new forum was informative, lively, and generally friendlier than the previous one. One member noted Sopranoland Forum offered 'many of the same opportunities for sharing, greater self-knowledge, etc. as do "real" groups. I feel a kinship and friendliness with many posters and notice when regulars go on hiatus'. The same member also described his usual experience of the group as 'performing', yet added, 'but of late I can't help but notice "storming" between newbies and group leaders. But this is a natural and predictable phase of groupwork' (May 26, 2004). Signs of a sense of belonging were identified in places throughout the sample amongst members as they referred to

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[161] After repeatedly conducting a search in the site for other members who may have eventually acquired the feminised 'Goomba' status, I realised I was the only one designated 'Goombaette'. This might indicate the knowledge the webmistresses had acquired about me through our email exchanges, in which I presented my gendered offline name with my academic intentions. As noted in Chapter 5, this information was also made public to the group on a regular basis in off-topic threads.

[162] The somewhat ambiguous nature of this subject title invited disclosures of present place of residences and short narratives about where a member was raised in childhood.

[163] This is in stark contrast to Hill and Calcutt's (2001) account of a UK based *Buffy* fan-site (BuffyUK.org) in which one 'popular room' that concentrates on 'getting to know community members' documents over 35,000 posts. The commitment by these UK fans of a US cult tv show that is often denigrated in the UK's public sphere, illustrates that UK *Buffy* audiences 'have to work hard at being fans and engaging in fan activities which are about the shows, rather than about scheduling and censorship' (*ibid.*).

others' user names in mutual support or used apology and mitigating devices to express alternative positions. At the later point in Season Five many had participated in discussions regularly or had confessed to lurking since episode one. Similarly, longer-term members from the previous Sopranoland message boards had established familiarity and general respect for others' diverse opinions. My impression was that there was also a feeling of polite ethos and solidarity amongst these same posters during my regular Season Five post-episode chats, although some tensions were identified and the potential for flaming was clearly apparent at times. More aggressive flaming, that is, the type described by Vrooman (2002: 60) in which the main objective is to silence or ''kill' another person', in general, was contained by the presence of moderators (either by issuing warnings or by editing posts) in both the message boards and chat room. However, my own encounter with the consequence of this type of performative attack was another confirmation of the unresolved difficulties I faced in adopting the often contradictory scholar-fan multiple subject position. In one instance I recall experiencing a physiological response to a flame, an increase in resting heart rate and sweaty, shaky hands, not unlike the symptoms Seabrook (1994: 70, cited in Vrooman 2002: 51) documents. At other times when my post or chat interaction was challenged, I found myself rendered speechless, embarrassed, not knowing how to respond, except to choose to be silent or deflect the situation by changing the subject, a strategy I had frequently observed in others. One member's accusation, for example, during a post-episode chat about Carmela's poor parenting skills in relation to the badly behaved Anthony Junior, brought up my own anxieties about knowing how to handle my equally challenging eight-year old son. After disclosing my shortcomings as a mother who, like Carmela, frequently lost her temper and shouted at her children, the other self-identifying male member's disapproving response prompted me quickly to move the discussion on to something else.

Given the opportunity to engage in more spontaneous exchange, which enabled chatters to clarify easily their positions, some members exhibited their preference for this form of electronic communication and their presence appeared more visible than it had been in the message boards.[164] At the same time, some prominent posters who generated pages of sophisticated character or episode analyses appeared uncomfortable with the fast flow of synchronous interaction characterised by delayed responses and frequent interruptions which made it difficult at times to follow the virtual conversation. Discourse in chats, overall, seemed consistent with message boards with respect to the issues I highlighted earlier. General recognition was apparent with some high profile members and moderators. Consider this

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[164] Unlike the message board space, the chat room also enabled me to develop a rapport with some regular chatters who disclosed personal information about their offline lives in addition to offering their views about participating in what they considered to be a smoother running forum. The topic of such conversations, however, was usually short lived when a moderator was present when the task at hand focussed on evaluating the episode.

member's response to a humorous and witty post sent by a key moderator in an off-topic thread created by me, titled, 'You know you are a fan when....':

> oh (Name withheld) - some of those are brilliant, you've given me plenty of ideas for enhancing my own status as a true fan.
>
> (Civilian: posts 35; June 3, 2004)

A pattern of enthusiastic response for another experienced poster/moderator mentioned earlier was also noticeable. This 'Capo' was often applauded for producing many intellectual, formal, essay-style analyses[165] of Dr. Melfi's symbolic role throughout the series. One 'Newcomer', for example, responded to the 'Capo's' early Season Five multiple page textual analysis of Tony and Melfi's relationship by writing in this extracted post,

> You've put so much time and effort into this post, and the analysis is so superb, that I couldn't possibly read it and then not respond. Still, I'm responding more out of respect/admiration than any thoughts about your post...
>
> .... Ah, thank you. I had these thoughts forming in my head, but I couldn't quite reach any understanding. Thanks for enlightening me.
>
> I can't say much more than "Yep, I agree."
>
> (Newcomer: posts 11; March 8, 2004)

In a later message titled 'Humble analysis – long post', one poster referred to the Capo as 'esteemed' (Newcomer: posts 5; May 25, 2004). The level of this Capo's cultural, social and symbolic capital in comparison to other self-confessed 'Newcomers' was further acknowledged and respected in another earlier post that eagerly anticipated the Capo's later contributions: 'Can't wait for (Name withheld) analysis on this episode. Hoo yeah!' (Newcomer: posts; 17; May 24, 2004). These members and others tended to look to this Capo for inspiration and legitimation of their own fan status and at times expressed their respect in terms that resembled celebrity fan devotion.[166]

This prominent member's performance as intellectual-fan, however, was not valued highly by others in the group. Indeed his/her long-term commitment to the study of what one fan called

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[165] The self-editing facility that offered users the opportunity to edit text after sending a post appeared to be often utilised in lengthy formal posts which were marked 'edited by 'poster's name'', and included time and date of edit. For an interesting discussion about the amount of 'intellectual capital' some fans perform in fan communities, see Hills & Jenkins (2001) and Hills's later elaboration of the term 'fan-scholar' (Hills 2002).

[166] Since the time of this fieldwork, this moderator has left the group to create another forum for *Sopranos* fans. The reason for this departure, it was claimed, was a case of too much forum traffic, which could be more easily monitored in a new forum. It became clear, over time, that members who respected this moderator's contributions would soon become the first users of the new site. In this sense, the member also obtained 'Hierarchy of Leaders' in addition to the other hierarchical levels. As cited in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5, see 'The Chase Lounge', http://www.thechaselounge.net/. Accessed on June 28, 2007.

the 'character-development' aspect of the series' narrative structure also appeared to be the original source of some of the group's divisions, as suggested above. This was particularly noticeable when a camp of other posters displayed less amicable terms in their challenge to positions that favoured explorations of Tony's slow psychic journey. These posters ignored the use of mitigating devices as exhibitions of politeness and defied any notions of a common, cohesive community practice. The two posters below, for example, were typical of many who expressed more explicit intolerance.

> By the way, this is what a real Sopranos episode is supposed to be like; not that dream bullshit.
>
> (Newcomer: posts 10; May 23, 2004)

> again with the tony leaving scenario??? why didnt tony leave at the end of season 1 after the botched hit? want to know why? because hes not a pussy and wouldnt just bail out on his "family" like a coward
>
> your prediction is filled with holes
>
> (Big Goomba: posts 142; May 25, 2004)

While some disputed the manner of such unsupported responses, others expressed obvious anxiety when they proposed an opinion they felt might cause further dispute. This extracted post illustrates an overt desire to keep peace in the forum when embarking on what this poster and others perceived as the 'action vs. character-development' debate:

> Whacking for whacking's sake?
>
> This episode has been received as: "Wow"..."Best ever"..."Awesome"... "10"...etc. My post is not to instigate a flame war of "action/violence aficionados" vs. "psychologically minded, character-development scholars." Nor, am I taking issue with the overwhelmingly enthusiastic reception of Long Term Parking, as it was truly riveting. What I am seeking is a more detailed and nuanced explanation as to why, for many, Ade's extinction was the meritorious element of this episode.
>
> (Associate: posts 205; May 24, 2004)

Although this received five well-considered, respectful responses, evidence that there was a 'war' narrative brewing, not unlike the one occupying the diegetic space of *The Sopranos*, as another poster pointed out explicitly, was clearly apparent around this subject and in a further series of disagreements relating to the character Adriana.[167]

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[167] While this following post illustrates a strong desire to uphold a level of harmony in the group, it also offers some insight about the level of emotional intensity fans may experience with the narrative space of

6.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter I have explored a multiple range of discursive practices fans utilised in the two *Sopranos* groups, which enabled them reflexively to construct a sense of self in relation to their object of fandom and the community of imagination. In my lengthier examination of types of talk, forum interactions and interpretative strategies that took place in Sopranoland Forum, such as those involving the modes of discourse I have termed *critical apprehension of genre/text* and *extratextual orientation* or *talk about authorship*, I have pointed to the playful, affective nature of fan activity, which involves a fan intensification of, rather than resistance to the commodity text. Fan play with the primary text and surrounding secondary texts, however, always involves negotiations with a larger community of others (with those in the wider public sphere and those within the fandom) who bring with them a range of knowledges and perceptions of cultural value. I explored how such negotiations may shape some areas of fan discourse and hence silence others in forum interaction. An initial examination of Sopranoland Forum's tendency to engage in intra-fandom struggles and some members' policing of certain forms of fan performance was examined as a consequence of this investigation. Chapter 7 will extend this enquiry by examining how other degrees of conflicting fan interests contributed to further power struggles in the Sopranoland Forum. This will be considered next to the very different hegemonic struggles that took place in the Yahoo! SopranosForum.

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the text. This intensity extends into the performative space of the forum, thus illustrating fans' intensification of the conditions of the 'commodity-text', rather than their resistance or transcendence from it (Hills 2002: 179):

> This show can't help but conjure up emotions...good ones, bad ones, sad ones and yes evil ones....The way it makes us feel is what has made it the f-ing coolest show of all time! Lets leave the wars to them'
> (Newcomer: posts 5; May 25, 2004)

Chapter 7: Introducing the politics of representation

7.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter emphasises fans' continued attempts to arrive at some form of group consensus with respect to both textual interpretation and related issues concerning community norms of behaviour. I will first consider the implications of the imbalance of fan status in relation to some Sopranoland Forum members' address to the subject of 'representation' as it pertained to the character Adriana and the minor character Matush. This discussion naturally progresses to an analysis of the discursive struggles that took place in the area of Sopranoland Forum's Spoilers, and Episode 12 Discussion disagreements surrounding Adriana.

My focus on 'the politics of representation' therefore extends from an analysis of fans' discussions of the political implications of the TV text, to a questioning of why some members' voices may be more fully represented in the forums. While the CMC practices that enabled group members to construct their identities within these two forum spaces show some similarities, clear distinctions arose that warrant further discussion. My focus in the latter part of the chapter on debates from the Yahoo! SopranosForum Spoilers topic thread considers the implications of what Hills has termed 'just-in-time fandom' (2002: 176). This aspect of forum dispute allowed me to explore the ways in which temporal norms of relevance encouraged geographical othering to take precedence over aesthetic concerns with the text for some members. Aside from reiterating more general conclusions (eg. those in the group residing outside the rhythms of the US broadcast schedule are left 'informationally alien' [*ibid.*; see also Hill & Calcutt 2001], or that many fans may place a higher value on the immediacy of episode discussion), studying performances of location, including those in which I participated, opened a space to consider how fans may construct a sense of self both through their negotiation with the technological conditions of the US based newsgroup and their emotional investments with a text that problematises romantic claims of bounded place and community. Performances of inclusiveness, egalitarianism and utopianism, which countered this form of hierarchical othering, also offered further material from which to investigate the ways fans negotiate their sense of identity, place and belonging in the apparently 'deterritorialised' computer-mediated fan community (see Sandvoss 2005: 56).

7.1 THE SUBJECT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Disagreements concerning Adriana ranged from the representation of her death scene, the issue of violence in connection with her relationship to Christopher, and her dealings with the character Matush and the FBI. While many disagreements were grounded in aesthetic and generic concerns, one fan's brief request for response within a longer praising review, 'How come every time a woman gets killed she is on her knees crawling away from the killer?' (Civilian: posts 59; May 24, 2004) stood out as it drew implicitly on *ideological, moral*

frameworks and invited a series of provocative responses about the show's representation of women. This following short reply challenges the intentions of authorship, while expressing sympathy with liberal feminist discourse in the latter part of the message with regards to notions of the 'male gaze'.

> I think it's some sick, male chauvinist sexual inunendo. Either that or the director is trying to give male viewers a cheap thrill.
>
> (Newcomer: posts 14; May 24, 2004)

After a string of disagreements that repeatedly justified Adriana's 'realistic', 'believable', 'vulnerable' motivations in terms of the conditions of the gangster genre, as well as drawing on extratextual knowledge of actress Drea de Matteo's views about the character, the member who posed the original question returned to silence the above poster's ideological argument. His/her initiation of the contentious topic, the member claimed, emerged out of mere curiosity and not a conscious attempt 'to make any sort of social statement' (Civilian: posts 69; May 25, 2004). This response clearly illustrates the poster's apprehension about potentially identifying with a liberal feminist subject position, which is likely to be at odds with the values of the majority. The same apprehension was also evident in the above poster's contradictory rebuttal which attempted to both comply with others by noting, 'I don't give a damn what the director was thinking. It was an aside, only', while at the same time criticising the usual 'overly-analytical' group for missing the 'sexual/powerless inuendo' (Newcomer: posts 19; May 25, 2004).

The poster's final softening of the attack with humour echoes Jonathan Gray's (2005) observations of a group of 'antifans' from the 'Television Without Pity' website who expressed their moral outrage about a US TV movie about homeland security. Like this *Sopranos* fan, the posters Gray identifies consistently 'tempered' their comments with humour in order to appear 'less overly moralistic and less offended than they really are' (*ibid.*: 849). Although the postings of these antifans indicated that they may not have actually watched the show, and hence their discourse was exemplary of 'a moral text without an aesthetic text or a case of the moral text subsuming the aesthetic text' (*ibid.*: 848), some comparisons with Sopranoland Forum posters can be made. The interpretation of Adriana's murder scene which did not depict graphic violence, for one poster, and for some in the Yahoo! SopranosForum, indicated an *ideological, moral framework* when noting it was understandable that the show 'refrained from including such questionable content. Even for The Sopranos, murdering a woman is pushing the envelope' (Newcomer: posts 6; May 25, 2004). Another poster's remarks distinctively illustrated his/her distance from engaging with the aesthetics of the text while prioritising the moral when interpreting the scene in which Christopher almost chokes Adriana to death:

> When I watched Drea DeMatteo get punched in the face and almost choked to death I felt so bad for her as an actor. She belongs in a better role/show.

> She deserves more. As much as I love the Sopranos, their consistent disrespect and violence towards women is disgusting.
>
> (Newcomer: posts 2; May 28, 2004)

While the themes of *The Sopranos* may allude to the wider political concerns of the 'real' world, as some fans themselves asserted, the practice of viewing the text through a 'moral lens' before an aesthetic one, thus criticising the primacy of the fictional world, David Chase, or indeed forum members' evaluations on ideological or moral grounds, was unusual and unacceptable in Sopranoland Forum when it occurred.[168] More tolerable for some was the assertion that the series, and more widely, television as a medium for communication to the masses, made self-conscious efforts to 'bring [those issues] out in the open'. The point that *The Sopranos* positively forced viewers, by implication through the reemployment of previous generic tropes (cf. Creeber 2002: 130) self-reflexively to examine their own uneasiness around the issue of violence against women was emphasised when the same poster wrote, 'I would hardly think TV glorifies violence against women. When Chris was choking her even my husband was ill' (Newcomer: posts 13; May 28, 2004). Similar reactions to the choking scene were also suggested when some fans used descriptive terms such as 'disturbing', 'horrifying' 'painful to watch' and 'emotional'.

The potential for self-reflexive questioning and political awareness through the introduction of these disputes, was, however, constrained within the firm set of boundaries established by the Sopranoland Forum majority who valued *critical aesthetic evaluation* and *genre recognition*. As Gray (2005: 849) asserts, the avoidance of the mention of morality within the context of discussions about television viewing (he includes those within media studies scholarship), may point to an awareness of the 'uncool' nature of the topic, which invokes 'a discourse most dear to right wing media panic groups'. It is worth noting that although Gray points to the rare mention of morality in many fan studies, Baym (2000: 102) highlights a more common practice amongst r.a.t.s.' members when they openly criticise soap-operas' ideological messages. In one example Baym discusses, a poster expresses 'their hope that this would be a *public service* story line that dealt realistically with the issue of domestic abuse' (*ibid*., emphasis in original). In another example, the member addresses her anger to the writers about the representation of women as victims, 'this is not entertainment, it's brutal and not pleasant to watch at all...' (*ibid*.: 103). Nick Couldry (2007) also discusses his own contradictory experience as a fan on the *Sopranos* New Jersey locations tour, in which the ironic distant pleasure of knowing the show is 'just television' (*ibid*.:143) conflicts with visiting the 'negative aura' (*ibid*.: 144) of the space of media tourism, the trip's final stop, 'Satin Dolls aka the Bada Bing Club' (*ibid*.: 145). As Couldry reflects on the moment in which he stands amid this space, he admits 'I personally am

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[168] See, for example, Jenkins's (1992: 84) similar discussion about *Star Trek* fans' objection to the introduction of politics when debates shifted from narrative concerns to the wider 'real-world implications of this issue'.

uncomfortable with the sour patriarchy that I sense saturates such places' (*ibid.*). Such discomforts, triggered by the tour's generation of 'its own contradictions between "play" and "life" ' (and by implication, the series' own narrative contradictions), introduce important questions for how media scholars and scholar-fans might attempt to interpret what Couldry describes as the contradiction 'between different levels of narrative absorption' (*ibid.*). In the following section I want to turn my attention to further fan appeals to *ideological, moral frameworks* as a way of exploring how the complexity of such contradictory levels of narrative engagement interacts with the social context of the group's dominant expectations. In doing so I hope to examine how members negotiated their multiple offline subject positions with their positioning in the fandom's social hierarchy.

7.2 TERRORISM AND 9/11: INTERPRETING THE CHARACTER 'MATUSH'

Although relatively few quotations through the entire week's sample were coded *ideological, moral frameworks* (44), the heated tone of some Sopranoland Forum disagreements that circulated around these issues suggested that these concerns, and not those of aesthetic 'ironic distance' continued to play an important role in some fans' engagement with the text. Similar tensions arose within disagreements surrounding Matush, the minor character responsible for implicating Adriana as an accessory to murder. One group of posters focussed exclusively on the ambiguous narrative origins and ethnic identity of the character by returning to previous seasons' episodes and scene clips from the official website for clues. The uncertainty about Matush's ethnicity and national identity left some guessing at and debating various possibilities while others simply labelled him a 'foreigner'. The member who accused others of making ignorant racist assumptions that he was a terrorist because he was Middle eastern and sent money back home to his brother for 'prep school', (interpreted by others as a 'madrassah', a fundamentalist Islamic terrorist training camp) was in the minority.

These disagreements facilitated various types of identity performances. Arguments against the accusing member included fan performance of textual knowledge through close reading of the episode as well as previous episodes that exploited racist themes or alluded to terrorism. The question of textual allusion to terrorism and 9/11 had also been addressed in previous weeks' discussions. This left an implicit assumption that this lone fan, although one who acquired 'Goomba' status, had not been keeping up with the series' history or the group's activities. Similarly, fans performed their cultural competencies and knowledges of other 'quality' television drama texts (*NYPD Blue*, *Law and Order*, *24*) to justify claims that *The Sopranos* was not alone in its controversial depiction of the wider issue of racism, which was often exploited through its representation of racist characters. Appeals to Chase's 'creative license' were also made with respect to character construction and ambiguity of suggested political content.

In some examples, the modes *broad referential frameworks*, and *ideological, moral frameworks* provided a structure through which discourses of the self and nationhood could be performed for both the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) and the 'community of imagination' (Hills 2001a; 2002). As fans on both sides of the dispute claimed their disdain for Al-Qaeda terrorists, and thus expressed their concerns (or projected their personal fears [see Gray 2005: 851]) for the US public, the 'Utopian aspirations' of their membership within a virtual fan community (see Jenkins 2002: 158, citing MacDonald 1998) were increasingly challenged by their political or geographically defined memberships. Consider this extract in which the rare practice of drawing on *biographical narrative* and personal experience next to *talk about authorship*, is used to aid the interpretation of the potential terrorist theme in the text:

> I spent a lot of time in West Hollywood (Lived there for 3 years) - that area is like a mixing pot of different races - in fact two of my best friends are Armenian and Egyptian - and if I were to mention to them a prep school in Israel, Iran, Egypt or basically any where in the middle east or and maybe even Europe they would assume it's a terrorist training facilty especially if adrug dealer was sending money to them - especially if that drug dealer just found his religion again- which is what Chase wanted us to think - it just set the foundation for Ades character being even more innocent and naieve (sp?) - We felt more sorry for her due to the fact she thought this drug dealing x guy was infact a sweet guy. Chase always sets his characters up like this …
>
> and finally if you dont like to reference to terroist training camps - well welcome to the real world - Though none of us like to admit it but this world is more racist than it ever was - even with one of my best friends being Egyptian what do you think most people think in there heads when they see a group of arabs walking together in a subway station or in an airport? Better yet what do you think? I am not trying to start anything I love my Egyptian friend like a brother but if you think this world isnt racist I would like to know what planet you live on –
>
> (Civilian: posts 23; May 24, 2004)

Although in contradiction with some of the other proposals in the original, lengthy post, its mode of address to the group conducts a cynical ideological, moral questioning, ironically, as did the poster who facilitated the debate, about the impact of media in shaping social relations. In response, the poster in the minority returned with a confession that after viewing the scenes again he/she could identify the terrorism reference, yet this did not deter him/her from returning to the 'moral text' when implying, beginning with the mitigation phrase, 'My personal opinion', that the show's stereotypical representation of 'immigrants' was morally offensive:

> Now that I've gone and worn my politics on my sleeve, I've watched the episode again and just caught the line where Agent Cubitoso says to Agent Grasso regarding Matush 'there's the terror angle'. So yeah, y'all are right in suggesting that at least there's a POSSIBILITY that Matush is sending money back for nefarious purposes. Of course, we'll never know because Chase will never bring it up again. My personal opinion, however, is that most likely he's just a plain old drug dealer... just like some of the other immigrants this show has portrayed who've come to America to make illegal

cash (thinking specifically of the Russians Slava and Valery, and the Indian calling card ring from season 2).

As for 'got to have thicker skin', I do. Living in New York, working in television production and journalism, you''ve got to be able to separate yourself from an issue and see it objectively, and you've got to prepared to be disgusted, horrified, and morally offended and still come to work the next day. I suppose I am a little sensitive to this one particular issue and stereotype, because I consider it very dangerous and easily misunderstood considering the present political situation and world climate we live in. So I kinda can''t help but rant.

Anyway, enough of that.

(Goomba: posts 112; May 25, 2004)

As Gray notes, such sensitivities about 'dangerous and easily misunderstood' mass media, may illustrate the performance of 'a concern for others' reception' (2005: 851). For Gray, this type of antifandom is the manifestation of an experience that moves 'beyond the level of personal interaction with a text' to one that illustrates an '[obsession] with the "massness" of the medium and, hence, a good deal of what the text means to them is a reflection of what they believe it will mean to others and what effects it will have on others' (*ibid.*). He adds

> ...antifandom can become a powerful means of constructing one's own self and personal media fluency and literacy in relation to the deficient viewing of others, and the moral text may be a text that many viewers feel compelled to consume before reveling in the aesthetic. (*ibid.*: 852)

Following this argument, in the case of the isolated and subsequently silenced voices of these few *Sopranos* fans, whom I would describe as 'ideological/moral-fans' rather than antifans, (at least at certain 'moments' in their fandom) ideological/moral-fandom might be understood as a means through which members construct their fan identity against the majority of others whose viewing they judge as ideologically/morally 'deficient'. Consider, for example, the earlier poster's accusation that 'overly-analytical' fans missed the 'sexual/powerless inuendo'. Fiske's (1992b: 43) assertion that a fan's accumulation of knowledge 'functions as a way of gaining prestige' however, appears to take on a different meaning here. Situated amongst a group of other highly knowledgeable, skilled performers, the articulation of a subject position defined through a political allegiance can be interpreted as a further performance through which social distinction and cultural capital can be emphasised. However, as it is at odds with the values of the majority, this performance is socially risky, as fans' own discourse suggests, and can lead not to prestigious social capital, but ostracising from the community. Baym's (2000: 174, emphasis in original) final summary about the ways in which the r.a.t.s. online community encourages participation through the affirmation of identity seems particularly salient here with respect to the amount of social or symbolic capital a fan can expect to acquire: 'Perhaps one *can*

be anyone he or she wants to be online, but if one wants to be admired or even liked, then he or she would be wise to attend to the very real social constraints that groups develop'.

7.3 EXPECTATIONS OF LOGICAL KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE: RATIONAL VS. IRRATIONAL FANDOM

> Reply: Is Ade really dead?/Possible spoiler...
>
> It's absurd that this topic is even being discussed. She's DEAD, end of story. If this were "Days of Our Lives" that might not be the case.
>
> (Newcomer: posts 17; May 25, 2004)

7.3.1 Spoilers

Spoiler threads were another area in which the policing of certain performances of fandom were marked in both the Sopranoland Forum and the Yahoo! SopranosForum, albeit with differing emphases for the two groups. I will first address the spoilers debates that occurred in the Sopranoland Forum. As suggested earlier, spoilers are widely used conventions in online fan forums which offer information or clues about a show's future narrative turns, thus 'allowing viewers to make a rational choice between their desire for mastery over the program universe and the immediacy of first viewing' (Jenkins 1995: 59). The choice between a fan's spoilt or unspoilt pleasure largely depends on others following correct netiquette procedure which requires that spoilers are correctly labelled. The notion of authenticity is usually prioritised in the exchange of spoiler knowledge. References to authentic and reputable external sources such as previews, interviews, magazines, Net articles, etc., add to the 'credibility' of spoiler information (Baym 2000: 87). Uncited sources are likely to be challenged and interpreted as hoaxes, as were many in the sample, and possibly deleted by moderators, as was threatened in one case after a series of disagreements.

Those who wilfully access spoilers often appropriate them in order collectively to speculate future narrative events, thus encouraging the 'production of new fantasies, broadening the field of meanings that circulate around the primary text' (Jenkins 2002: 160, citing Baym 1998). Many spoiler disagreements hence centred around the 'plausibility' of fan speculations based on credible extratextual information which is used to enhance one's experience and interpretation of the text. It was not surprising that spoiler posts and disagreements tended to echo the discourse in Episode Discussion disagreements. While one spoiler drew heavily on information a fan gathered from another *Sopranos* forum and made some narrative suggestions that included characters Carmela and AJ, concerns over what Tony would do for his 'other' family comprised most of the post's contents, with many positive responsive speculations reflecting this emphasis. What is intriguing in this thread is that even though one close reader found many 'holes' in the 'theory' and focussed on textual evidence, rather than the extratextual to challenge its

implausibility, the majority of posters disagreed, accepted its propositions and did not make any further alternative suggestions for narrative.

Responses such as 'Damn I think this is the real deal. I kind of wish I didnt read it' (Newcomer: posts 16; May 27, 2004), and 'Daaamn....it explains just about everything. Thanks for posting that' (Newcomer: posts 4; May 27, 2004), also revealed how fans attempted to negotiate their disappointment in spoiling their future viewing pleasure with the pleasures of receiving 'forbidden' knowledge (Cantwell 2004). Cantwell (2004) argues that the articulation of one's 'spoiler status' (whether one is a 'spoiler-avoider' or 'spoiler-prone') in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* online fan communities becomes another way of asserting one's individual fan identity. Those who confess to these 'guilty pleasures' may thus sense their opposition to the more valued practice of the immediacy of the viewing experience, which requires taking 'distance' from spoiler knowledge. Again this notion of 'distancing' is useful and can be extended in this example in which the dominant theme in Sopranoland Forum spoiler threads did not articulate anxiety over guilty pleasures, but focussed more on the 'logical' nature of the spoiler postings. In this case, detachment was observed in the intellectualisation many fans deemed was necessary to find pleasure in spoiler information, speculations and hence their experience of the primary text. The agreeing fans accepted that spoilers were usually not 100% correct, but found this spoiler's assumptions 'logical', 'credible' and more likely to be 'correct' than other, more 'asinine', 'moronic' speculations such as those that revisited ideas that Tony would 'flip', based on rumours that James Gandolfini was planning to leave the show, or 'lose his heart for battle' after a member predicted Carmela's unexpected death (Big Goomba: posts 155; May 29, 2004).

Other typical responses, like those discussed earlier, emphasised the cultural value of *The Sopranos'* hierarchical position in relation to other 'lower' forms of television. The soap opera genre seemed again to be the key object of attack, with the spoilers' topic moderator arguing that the show would 'Jump the shark... The Sopranos would lose all credibility...That is for "All My Children" not The Sopranos...' (Capo: posts 811; May 23, 2004). The pressing issue surrounding spoiler disagreements eventually became how to define a spoiler with this moderator concluding that there was a difference between spoilers and 'wild predictions', with previous 'valid' spoilers turning out to be 90% correct (Capo: posts 901; May 29, 2004). Apparently against all expectations of 'rational' spoiler netiquette, the large range of other posts that prompted disputes were interpreted as falling more appropriately into the genre of 'Fan fiction', and were described as 'irrational' or 'drivel', resulting in some being permanently removed from the threads. Although there were signs of a serious discussion involving the moderator about creating a new thread for this 'genre', the idea never came to fruition, confirming there were limits to what many, in particular those who held positions of forum authority, considered pleasurable knowledge exchange or speculative fantasy based on this knowledge.

7.3.2 Declarations of love

> I think this is a thread where everyone just loves Ade and misses her and doesn't want her dead.....for the most part.
>
> (Soldier: posts 331; May 26, 2004)

A similar pattern of behaviour that attempted to construct the criteria for logical, rational fandom against the 'wild' irrational kind, which is particularly characteristic of the negative discourse surrounding soap opera fandom (see Harrington & Bielby 1995; Baym 2000) was also apparent around the impatience towards certain expressions of love and loss for Adriana in various Sopranoland Forum Episode 12 Discussion and Spoiler threads. Consistent across both Sopranoland Forum and Yahoo! SopranosForum were many articulations of the intensity of fans' emotional state in relation to the Adriana storyline. 'I loved Ade…damn it' (Newcomer: posts 6; May 23, 2004); 'I am still in shock and awe, I am gonna miss hur' (Newcomer: posts 1; May 23, 2004); 'The emotion was overwhleming' (Newcomer: posts 16; May 24, 2004); 'I actually friggin' cried when Adriana died…(my girlfriend laughed at me as I was crying in on the couch' (Newcomer: posts 7; May 24, 2004); 'I sat there sobbing into the pillow in bed next to my Husband during the scene where chris was strangling Aid' (Newcomer: posts 2; May 24, 2004). Some fans expressed their physical reactions to the shocking sequence of events: 'My stomach was in knots for Ade all thru the show' (Civilian: posts 61; May 24, 2004); 'My stomach was doing an "Ade" while watching this all unfold' (Associate: posts 281; May 23, 2004).

Many members from both groups accepted that Adriana's role was final, confirmed by the actor's widely acknowledged new contract in the sitcom *Joey*, the spin off from *Friends*. Others consistently returned to the ambiguous dream-like sequence in which Adriana drives her car on the highway with her red suitcase in the passenger seat, and the aesthetics of the murder scene, in their attempt to fill in textual gaps that invited suggestions she might still be alive. Some made predictions drawing on proposed spoilers that suggested Drea de Matteo would return to the series in Season Six. With this pool of information these members created various alternative narratives built on the idea that Silvio may have been an FBI informant and hence shot the gun away from Adriana to allow her to go into hiding. Others suggested that the murder scene could have been a dream, a notion that also arose in suggestions for narrative concerning Tony's future actions. In apologetic form, as if in anticipation of the huge negative response in Sopranoland Forum, some fans confessed that these theories about Adriana were highly unlikely scenarios, but confessed they were declarations made out of their love for the character they dearly missed. While there was some evidence of members' impatience with this type of emotional discourse in the Yahoo! SopranosForum group,[169] discouragements in the

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[169] This reaction was noticeably more isolated in the Yahoo! SopranosForum, and in one case, appeared much later within the body of a spoilers-related disagreement. This suggested that it was the spoilers topic

Sopranoland Forum were more noticeably rife when responses such as this one suggested the irrational nature of the other fan's state of mind: ' …this is a TV show, not reality. Something is missing when you displace this fun for reality' (Civilian: posts 21; May 31, 2004).

The tendency for many Sopranoland Forum members repeatedly to illustrate such strong disapproval of what they perceived to be anti-rational and anti-realistic texts, reflects Gray's further discussion about another type of TWoP antifan who expressed 'disgust at texts that they felt violated realism or common sense' (Gray 2005: 852). The binary opposition between the rational and irrational fan or text created by these Sopranoland Forum members may again suggest that the conditions of *The Sopranos*, while emphasising the features of an unstable and fluid postmodern text, yet one that is still heavily grounded in the regimes of verisimilitude, invite such performances, while also suggesting that there may be a dominant perception for many in this group of what is the ideal or 'good' version of *Sopranos* fandom. Such an ideal would demand a *complete* reduction of the fan object and its audience interpretations to 'a rational and realistic text' (*ibid.*: 854), thus emphasising a preference towards a more masculinised discourse. Therefore, in order for many to validate and distinguish their fan identity within this community they must claim their antifandom towards other, by implication, feminised, texts (and their feminised audiences) that do not meet the same intellectual expectations. These conclusions are consistent with my earlier observations of the previous Sopranoland Forum and the 'Yahoo! Sopranos' group[170] in which I participated for a lengthy time at the start of this research, which also exemplified the pleasures many found in their performative attacks directed towards the 'irrational' others in the group. As Gray notes of TWoP's antifans, these members consistently 'keep going back for more' providing pleasure and entertainment for themselves and others in the community of imagination, while producing discursive justification and reassurance of their own fan identity (*ibid.*). This exercise in reassurance, in which '[o]ne fan audience...therefore takes up a position of cultural power relative to another' has been observed by Hills (2004a: 64) in relation to the US series *Dawson's Creek*, which he describes as an example of 'mainstream cult' TV, a text that attracts a fan following and contains cult textual features yet is 'denied entry to the 'cult' intertextual network':

> What we see in the 'mainstream cult' *is a cultural power struggle for and over legitimacy between different fan cultures* rather than between, say, fans and producers. Certain texts – teen TV that cannot be linked to 'cult' forms such as superhero comics, science fiction/fantasy or horror –are denied entry to the 'cult' intertextual network. This means that texts that are closer to culturally conventional female interests (including soaps as well as teen TV) are relatively delegitimated and denied cult status despite their dedicated fan followings.

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and not the subject of Adriana-related speculations that facilitated, up to that point, this lurking member's interest in finally voicing his/her opinion. This member was also not identified as an active poster in Week 3 of the fieldwork.

[170] As noted in Chapter 5, see Yahoo! groups – Sopranos: http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/sopranos/.

(*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

While Hills's point focuses on the cultural power struggles that create distinctions between different fan-audience groups, Jancovich's (2000) observations about horror fans stress how fans of the same popular cultural text construct difference within one fandom. Jancovich draws on Thornton's (1995) reworking of Bourdieu's cultural capital (see my discussion in Chapter 3) in her coining of the term 'subcultural capital' which 'depends on its rarity and distinction from the supposedly mainstream audiences' (Jancovich 2000: 29, citing Thornton 1995). Jancovich usefully illustrates Thornton's point that 'subcultural capital is usually gendered as masculine' in his argument that some horror fans' privileging of 'real' and 'authentic' horror films, often defined as 'those films of violent 'excess' whose circulation is usually restricted (and often secret and/or illegal)', as opposed to 'the commercial, sanitized tripe which is consumed by moronic victims of mass culture', becomes a way for fans to distance themselves from the 'inferior' others of feminised mass culture (Jancovich 2000: 25-29). In the case of these *Sopranos* fans we see a similar intra-fandom desire in this struggle for cultural distinction, often with the terms of authenticity either being defined through the privileging of what some may see as the authentic, original, masculinised gangster narrative, thus emphasising a debt to the past violent genre with its patriarchal themes and pre-modernist claims to bounded place and community, or the privileging of the auteur in order to intellectualise and justify their pleasures with a television programme.

In the following section I want to begin with a brief summary of the general tone of the Episode 12 Discussion posts in the Yahoo! SopranosForum. This will be followed by a lengthier investigation of the area of disagreements in a spoilers thread and the ways in which some members of the forum engaged in a form of boundary policing that was less concerned with genre distinctions and issues surrounding cultural values of taste, but was more about reinforcing claims for location and geographical difference.

7.4 PERFORMING LOCATION, PERFORMING TOLERANCE

The Yahoo! SopranosForum Episode 12 Discussion threads illustrated, overall, a general lack of interest in Melfi's therapeutic relationship to Tony, as well as relatively little sustained enthusiasm for the war storyline. Less opportunity, therefore, appeared available for the Yahoo! SopranosForum members to split into the same divisive categories as were discovered in the Sopranoland Forum. Lengthy evaluations of Tony's character also appeared minimal, relative to those observed in Sopranoland Forum. Only a small part of one post interpreted Tony's violent anger toward Christopher as an emotional expression of his own painful loss over killing Adriana. Within this post was a response to another member's confusion about the aesthetics of Tony's 'dream' in the previous episode, which led to an interpretation of the dream as symbolic of the war storyline and an evaluation of Tony as sexually addicted, after employing a call girl.

Other evaluations of Tony were addressed through interpretations of the final scene, which, apart from one post, focussed mainly on his relationship to the two key female characters, Adriana and Carmela. While similar modes of discourse around these topics (*characterisation*, *suggestion for narrative*, *critical aesthetic evaluation*) also frequently arose in Sopranoland Forum, what stands out as distinctive here is the general avoidance of intensive character involvement, precise narrative speculations and hence disagreements, about Tony's future family and business decisions, both dominant concerns that arose in Sopranoland Forum. The question, for example, over whether Tony would choose his domestic family and 'flip' or escape the war and Mob, was never explicitly proposed (with the exception of one playful post) or debated. The 'flipping' theme was introduced only in posts concerning Christopher's trip for cigarettes, which presented his dilemma about whether to choose Adriana or his life in the Mob, however only two posters drew on *genre recognition* in their comparison of this moment to the film *Goodfellas*.

The Yahoo! SopranosForum group, as I indicated earlier, appeared to engage far less in performative attacks against the 'irrational' others in the group whose confessions of love for Adriana explicitly exposed their emotional closeness to the fan object. While there were only three brief, one-line disagreements concerning the war-related actions of Tony's rival (two falling into an Episode 11 Discussion thread, and one within an Episode 12 Discussion thread) 14 disagreements emerged over the subject of Adriana's death. The relationship between these posts and the ones in Sopranoland Forum is obvious in many respects, however there were some distinctions to be made about the framing of discussions and disagreements. Only two posters referred specifically to Chase to defend their positions, while others drew on more general terms of authorship in order to make textual connections between the representation of Adriana's death scene and previous murders involving other female characters. While the questioning of the representation of Adriana's murder scene led three members to draw on extratextual sources and suggested *ideological, moral frameworks* (eg. the editing did not show her getting killed because the 'high volume of complaints with women being killed/abused on the show has forced Chase to keep it down to a minimum' [May 25, 2004]) their engagement with the aesthetic and not *ideological, moral frameworks* dominated their positions. The broader referential themes of terrorism and politics never arose in Episode 12 Discussion threads, nor did any discussions, aesthetic, ideological/moral, or other, regarding the character Matush and his role in implicating Adriana with the FBI.

The tone of many disagreements concerning Adriana's future in the series illustrated a visible level of tolerance and respect to which regular members appeared accustomed. Only two more aggressive challenges to theories that Adriana was alive emerged from one apparently newer, or

less frequent poster[171] who argued that the discussion was, he/she wrote, 'getting absurd. Fans of this show think its soooo deep that even when something obvious happens they try looking for disjointed occurences. Why not just have an alien come down and scoop her up? Wow, Wouldn't David Chase be a genius then!!' (May 25, 2004). While many Sopranoland Forum members expressed similar impatience towards 'irrational', *ludic* postulations and hence made *hierarchical generic comparisons*, the discourse in the Yahoo! SopranosForum Week 12 illustrated little explicit attention to this area. There were no direct attacks against the soap opera genre from members, although one regular member's[172] distribution of a popular press review titled, 'Did Adriana really get it?' which quoted an uncited, presumably online fan audience source that mimicked the derogatory terms often expressed in Sopranoland Forum, suggested an awareness of the power of this discourse. This type of generic hierarchical discourse certainly had appeared in varying degrees in my previous observations and in email correspondences, however, what is notable in this sample is the overall containment of this type of othering, based on perceptions of cultural value, which I described above.

Disagreements in spoilers tended to capture the tone of the group's struggles to maintain the value of the immediacy of the viewing and sharing experience, while also preserving fandom's more utopian ideals, which embrace notions of egalitarianism and diversity. The topics of concern relating to disagreements in a spoilers thread showed remarkable similarities as well as differences to those under debate in Sopranoland Forum. The matter of how to define a spoiler, for example, also generated much of the discussion, which then focussed around issues of netiquette and posting guidelines. The lengthy spoilers debate originated early in the first weeks of Season Five when one regular Australian fan voiced his frustration with the group because he claimed their unclear policy on spoilers 'ruined' his enjoyment of the show as he received episodes later than the US based members. Each time he entered the forum it was unclear which posts pertained to a certain week's episode, hence potentially spoiling his viewing pleasure. Kind suggestions were made about labelling procedures or formatting that would alert non-US fans and some posters regularly put these systems into practice within the Week 12 sample. This following post from a highly visible moderator, titled, in all caps, 'HOLDING OFF TO POST THOUGHTS ON EPISODES', however, brought attention to the contentious subject again and was the first in Week 12 to speak out on the Australian member's behalf:

> Hey Folks,
>
> This is (Name withheld) and I have been thinking of something that may be of concern. I know that everybody likes to jump on the forum and post

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[171] This member, for example, did not post in the earlier Week 3 sample. The tone of this member's previous disagreements concerning character evaluations and episode related disagreement around the character 'Finn', also showed no desire to maintain friendliness.

[172] This member, in addition to the forum's creator/Capo, regularly posted online press reviews and other relevant extratextual sources. These extratextual references, as previously noted in Chapter 5, accounted for a generous proportion of posts in this sampled week.

messages about the latest episodes that air. And, I have something to ask of you if you're willing to do this. Since the Sopranos is aired on a delayed status in other parts of the world, I am asking you to either hold off on your posts or do a scroll down to post your remarks on the episodes. Us Americans need to consider the thoughts of other members that are on this group who live in other countries who want to find out what happens first hand by watching the episodes when they air in their area. I hope everyone is going to go along with me on this one because I think it's only fair. You can talk about the actors who are on the show and their outside activities, but the new episodes are really something that should be held off for discussion or put into a scroll down to the bottom post. Think about this idea and get back to me with an answer.

Yours,

(May 28, 2004)

A total of twenty-nine responses followed in this thread, twenty-two of which fell within the time frame specified for sampling with others moving into the next week's sample. One member noted he had no problem with the request but six others clearly disagreed either politely, or in less 'diplomatic' terms, to use the term of one poster, and others attempted to discuss viable options. One poster's frustration with the request led the member to prioritise the importance of timely discussion as well as the geographical identity of the forum's dominant US membership base, a theme that arose in Sopranoland Forum disagreements concerning the interpretation of the character Matush. His final comment, '...its america its a free country and nobody is going to tell us how to make a post on the board. if you dont like it go elsewhere,' (May 28, 2004) invited some others (those in agreement as well as disagreement) to perform their cultural location and allegiance to nationhood during the week which preceded the US Memorial Day weekend, as one poster reminded others, the annual US holiday which celebrates the remembrance of those who died fighting for their country. This following poster, for example, specifically drew on the wider rhetoric of America's 'war against terror' to support his/her position:

> We all know that the best time to discuss an episode is right after it's been viewed. Your adrenaline is pumping, your memory is unclouded and possible plot twists for the next episode can be examined. By having people delay discussion, you will kill the message boards.
>
> So, sorry, I will not hold off discussion. I will not speak any other language than English. In September, I will root and cheer my ass off when an American wins a gold medal. I will pray when I want to. I will say "One Nation, under God" when I recite the Pledge of Allegiance. I will not buy French wine, cologne or clothing.
>
> Why are WE always asked to bend and no one else? I appreciate Australia's support in the war against terror, but can Aussie's please wait to read the posts, like I do, when one hasn''t yet viewed it?
>
> Thank you.

Good day!

(May 29, 2004)

The process of 'othering', which resulted in the subsequent removal of the Australian member from the group by the 'Capo', is likely to occur when some members 'fall' out of sync with the timely activities of the rest of the group. This commentary echoes Hills's (2002: 176) notion of 'just-in-time fandom' illustrated through his observations about the Canadian *X-Files* fan who cannot keep up with the 'spatio-temporal rhythm' of the US scheduling of the show and is thus subject to 'falling out of the newsgroup's mutually reinforcing spheres of anticipation and speculation'. The consequences of 'falling out of step' thus reinforce the potential for flaming as well as heightening 'a geographical difference which marks the poster as inevitably 'alien' to the group's US-based composition' (*ibid.*). Like the Yahoo! Australian member, I too felt the real implications of 'falling out of step' with the group's spatio-temporal norms. My own obvious geographical difference to this group and the US dominated Sopranoland Forum caused anxiety from the start and significantly impacted on my experience of participation in forum discussions as well as my viewing of Season Five episodes a week or so later than other members (after receiving them from a US contact). In some instances during the immediate post-episode real-time chats in the Sopranoland chatroom, I felt a distinctive hesitation when logging on, during some absurd early morning hour because of the UK time difference, knowing that my viewing pleasure would be unwittingly 'spoiled' by other fans' accounts of the episode. I also could not escape the feelings of inadequacy that accompanied my desire to participate in discussions that allowed no space for my previous episode history experience. Upon reviewing records of my own discourse in the forums (for example in my introduction to the groups and in threads such as 'Where Are You From') and in chats, I found that on repeated occasions I defensively invested in a performance of self as a citizen of the United States, foregrounding the issue of nationhood and the romantic ideal of my Italian-American 'origins', celebrating the location which shaped my formative years and young adult identity, while downplaying the appearance of my later acquired British, academic identity. In this sense, my discourse appeared to function as a means of attempting to overcome any unforeseen difficulties that could have emerged from the interplay of my physical and professional distance from these US dominated fandoms.[173]

In another sense, my nostalgic defensive claims to origins, family, ethnic, and national identity can also be interpreted as a playful discursive practice that was in keeping with the fan community's enunciation of cultural values and discourses articulated in *The Sopranos'* series. My imagining of what Sandvoss (2005) has termed the first category of fan place, the non-

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[173] Hollway and Jefferson's (2000: 15) use of the term 'investment' refers to 'someone's desires and anxieties, probably not conscious or intentional, which motivate the specific positions they take up and the selection of accounts through which they portray themselves'.

physical yet 'socially manifest' (*ibid.*: 53) place that defines 'the virtual worlds of fan narratives', enabled a responsive 'textual roaming'[174] (*ibid.*: 54) (as I have suggested in Chapter 4), in which I shared with others in the community of imagination, a symbolic journey to a place that represented some form of the social, material world with which I felt strongly familiar and associated with a sense of home.[175] While *The Sopranos* encourages a diverse, and often opposing, range of fan participation, as I have explored at length above, the prominence of the confined spatial world and habitus experienced by the series' fictional community also invites performances of cultural identity that are rooted in the myths of tradition. However, I hesitate to suggest that the power of *The Sopranos'* formal qualities, in this instance, wholly determined the above Yahoo! SopranosForum member's affirmation of cultural identity as [politically conservative] 'American' (as opposed to the affirmation of a subcultural fan identity determined against the 'mainstream' other). This performance might be better understood as a complex multiple negotiation, in which the offline located cultural self is situated in relation to this US produced media text and the technological, temporal, spatial conditions of the US Yahoo! fan newsgroup.

Other members' concerns for the welfare of the group's non-US members introduced insights into their perceptions of the forum's history. This spoilers topic also appeared to provide some more silent, distant members, who had not shown any interest in Episode Discussion, with the opportunity to perform their status in the community through the framework of the forum's ethos of friendliness, respect and idealistic concern for others. One long-term member, who had previously noted in a plea to the 'Capo' that 'This used to be a forum of intelligent and TOLERANT people' (May 29, 2004), addressed another long-term member with the reminder, 'You remember how great this forum used to be...It lead to some great input and great friendships' (May 30, 2004). In this response to the above patriotic poster, the same member reflects upon the old ways of the forum:

> (Name withheld), I don't believe the original request was NOT to discuss, but simply to put SPOILER in the subject line and scroll down a little. (The forum's creator: Name withheld) has asked us before each season and before

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[174] I am referring to Sandvoss's citation of Robert Aden's (1999) work, which explores the idea that fan texts offer opportunities for textual travel. My earlier discussion about the use of Turner's 'liminality' however needs to be considered here, as Aden compares Turner's observations of the pilgrimage and liminality directly with the experience of TV viewing. My earlier investigation of Sandvoss's (2005: 64) notion of fandom as a 'mobile *Heimat*', however, more accurately captures the symbolic sense of belonging to which I allude above. See Aden, R. (1999) *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Culture and Symbolic Pilgrimages*.Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press. See also Will Brooker's (2007) recent work which explores Aden's claims.

[175] HBO's official *Sopranos* website, for example, is well aware of the power of this first place of *The Sopranos'* fandom, even as the text's codes and tropes are self-consciously reconfigured and challenged, when they invite fans to contribute to discussion threads under the headings 'Growing up Italian' and 'New Jersey Stories' (See www.hbo.com/sopranos/community/index.shtml. Accessed on May 11, 2003). Organised media tours or fan 'pilgrimages' from New York City to various *Sopranos'* New Jersey locations, as cited by Couldry (2007; see also Couldry 2000), [what Sandvoss terms the third space or new landscapes of fandom (2005: 54)], as well as fansites such as Sopranoland, for example, have also responded to the appeal of geographical place in the fictional narrative.

finales to do so just out of simple consideration. I respect your opinion as it stands and I know you don't care if I do or not. But this forum has, in the past, attempted to maintain a decorum of respect for other fans, who are not as fortunate to see the epepss quickly as we do. I will continue to maintain SPOILERS no matter what any of you do.

Seems like I pushed the "patriotic American" button, huh? I am as patriotic as you, but no one doubted this board's patriotism...just respect for others. (Name withheld), it's just a TV show...no need to get your patriotic feathers ruffled. I remember you from this list and I respect you. I don't care if you like that or not. I was addressing the list's recent fall from grace, in regarding others OUTSIDE this country. No one gives a shit about anyone but themselves here in LaLaLaLand

> We SAY we worship God, but we really worship MONEY. I call a spade a spade and sometimes the truth hurts. Maybe many of the original members of this list left for a more tolerant forum?
>
> Everything changes and it's sad. This was a great forum once upon a time.
>
> Good Day!
>
> (May 30, 2004)[176]

The broader implications of this newsgroup dispute call attention to Sandvoss's (2005: 63) argument for an understanding of fandom that favours 'a heightened emphasis on the significance of place in fandom'. An individual's 'sense of place' (drawing on Meyrowitz 1985) in fandom, however, as Harrington and Bieby (2005) also explore in relation to Morley's (2001) work, is no longer tied to the constraints of physical locality, but is reconceptualised as 'a new sense of place', 'as these new group territories, whether virtual or territorial, are experienced as emotionally significant by fans' (Sandvoss 2005: 57). Sandvoss continues to stress, however, that the emotional home fans discover as they inhabit this 'new sense of place' finds its reference point in the object of fandom, the first category of fan place (*ibid.*). While fandoms' members will always offer up the possibility of diverse preferences and interpretations of this world, the landscapes of fandom (the third category of fan place), from the physical sites of media tourism to the virtual spaces of the Internet forums, 'are under pressure to provide a place corresponding to all such divergent readings' (*ibid.*: 58). What this extended discussion leads Sandvoss to argue, and is thus important to my analysis here, is that while these landscapes of fandom are often likened to the 'placelessness' defined by Edward Relph (1976: 18) [in their referentiality or 'other-directedness' (Sandvoss 2005: 58)], placelessness 'remains virtually impossible' as these spaces are 'peopled' (Sandvoss 2005:59, citing Bale 1998: 68). It is this peopling of places and spaces that renders the landscapes of fandom spatial and

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[176] It is important to note here that this post appears to be referring to an earlier message, in particular with regards to the inclusion of the sentence 'Seems like I pushed the "Patriotic American" button, huh?'. There is, however, no evidence within the thread of a previous post sent by this member that would indicate his/her reference to this topic. I am led then to make the assumption that the post to which this member refers may have been deleted by the forum's creator/moderator.

territorialised (see also Hine 2000: 108). 'Where' fans are physically located when they receive the fan text and 'when' they attempt to share with others their symbolic imaginings is still significant and important to scholarly discussions about online fandoms. While the World Wide Web has certainly opened up more avenues for wider international community participation, making the assumption that anyone in the world with an Internet connection may freely enter the public sites of online fandom 'safely' from their own home or place of work, hence diminishing 'the social risk that inevitably accompanies such fanatical behaviour' (Bailey 2002: 248), ignores the real constraints, as evidenced in this study, that diverse fan populations encounter when seeking inclusion.[177]

Gaining instant access to US programmes through the technological paths offered by the Internet is also a view that tends to over generalise the diffused fan-audience experience of participation. Although Bailey (2002: 251) seems careful to acknowledge that participation 'is dependent upon one's access to the Internet and the requisite technical skill' that is necessary to engage in chat rooms, downloading, file sharing, and the creation of virtual art, he adds that with the increase of ' "user friendly" technology' the skill levels required are 'dropping rapidly' (*ibid.*: 251). This may be true for some users, however, the legal implications of downloading may be more daunting for others, such as the Australian member of this group, and the non-US members in Sopranoland Forum who enquired early at the start of Season Five and were warned by the moderator that Sopranoland, under no circumstances, supported such activity. After threatening to delete their posts a fan responded with a similar plea not to download HBO shows from the website Bit Torrent after he/she received a threatening letter from their provider Comcast about their infringement of copyright laws (when caught downloading episodes of *Sex and The City*) (Civilian: posts 38; March 13, 2004). Whether or not this post put a complete stop to fans' more private correspondences or covert activities, it seems clear that exhaustive copyright battles that can occur between Internet-based fans and the television industry will continue to deter many devoted fans from these attempts.[178]

7.5 SUMMARY

This chapter examined how fans' multiple discursive investments and diverse interpretative strategies create tensions, silences, and unequal levels of fan status within the fan communities.

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[177] In addition to highlighting some of the above points, Harrington and Bielby (2005) observe, for example, that fan pleasures and their emotional relationship to a text can be significantly affected by modifications producers make in television formats when they travel globally. '[O]pen-ended soap narratives', produced in the US, for example, when 'sold on the global market in truncated packages' must certainly have a consequence for non-US resident fan reception as these fans develop different attachments to a show that has been subject to such transformation. A Croatian's experience of an isolated one hundred episodes is likely to vary from a US resident's fan's longer term, continuous experience of the soap opera (*ibid.*: 848).

[178] Bailey (2005: 192) observes similar anxieties amongst *Futurama* fans in the alt.tv.futurama newsgroup. However, fans' reactions to Fox strengthened their sense of community, forging connections which may not have occurred otherwise.

The discussion also illustrated that while many members in the Sopranoland Forum constructed their 'rational' fan identities in opposition to 'irrational' feminised 'others', the Yahoo! group tended to consciously constrain this form of othering as many prioritised the group's more utopian values. The concluding part of the chapter opened a space to consider how fans' emotional pleasures with their object of fandom may be affected by the physical locations of their reception. The '[o]ff-line temporal structures' (Hills 2002: 177) and local contexts of broadcasting and reception of this US produced series signalled the dominant US geographical positioning of the forum members. The performance of inclusion therefore was challenged and a form of othering was played out in which members utilised the reflexive space of the fan forum to claim their national difference. As a way of extending my earlier emphasis in Chapter 4 of the importance of reflexive ethnographic practice as a self-conscious strategy that seeks to make visible what is often rendered invisible in the research account, I have attempted to interweave my own experience of participation with the two groups in order to scrutinise my discursive investments with the same level of intensity I have examined in others.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

This research set out to explore a set of concerns and questions that were deliberately constructed with openness and flexibility in mind. By extending cultural studies' emphasis on the study of audience-text relations, I have conducted a 'virtual ethnographic' case study analysis of the ways in which sections of an online fan-audience community engage in a complex dialogic relationship with a popular US 'quality' TV series. The contemporary economic and technological conditions that enable the production and distribution of *The Sopranos* across the global marketplace have particular consequences for the social networks, and the imaginations of the individuals who comprise them, which develop around this series, whether they participate in face-to-face interaction, or in the online groups that form computer-mediated fan communities. By focussing on micro-level detailed empirical work for this research on audience groups who share their interest in the series through new technologies of communication, such as fan-created discussion forums, this study has examined how distinctive fan community and individual fan identities were shaped by the multiple conditions of the broadcast text and the Internet as a medium.

The findings of this case study invite an examination of a range of questions about audience as community and related issues concerning hegemony and hierarchies of power. However, the investigation extends beyond more narrow assumptions that power is centrally located in the culture industry and that audiences exist in relation to the hegemonic order through struggle or cooption. Rather than witness fans articulating opposing readings of *The Sopranos'* 'dominant' discursive themes through the alternative production of 'slash' art or fiction, practices which I have found to be marginal in this fandom, my experience in multiple *Sopranos*-related groups throughout the World Wide Web revealed that fans' main form of collective involvement with the series was located in their 'enunciative productivity' (Fiske 1992b) or the 'gossip' style of communication that emerged in forum discussions. While this 'gossip' also contributes to the construction of an interpretative fan community's 'meta-text' (Jenkins 1992), the scholarly overemphasis on fans' textual productivity or cultural production has the potential to marginalise 'the interpersonal connections through which the meta-text emerges' (Baym 2000: 18).

This point accentuates the importance of attending to a focus on fan performance in the social context of asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication. Conceptualising fan performance as a direct consequence of historical, social, economic and technological shifts in a 'media saturated' contemporary society emphasises ' 'the interplay between fans' agency (performance) and social and cultural macro structures (spectacle) as a dialogical process and thus positions fandom firmly within the context of industrial consumerism' (Sandvoss 2005: 158). The asynchronous quality of Internet discussion forums, and the synchronous quality of

chat rooms, both provide opportunities for the articulation of the 'performance of audiencehood' (Nightingale 1996), or the restaging of this dialogue between fan and commodity object. Fans thus perform their identities to a willing audience of others and reflect upon their individual and collective affective relationship to their object of fandom. In this respect, the 'textual dynamics' (Baym 2000: 210) that structure a favoured TV series, and which are shared through the collaborative fan community practices of personalisation, evaluation or speculation, closely intersect with the 'interpersonal dynamics' (*ibid.*) that define the performance of online community.

The observation that the majority of online *Sopranos* fans do not create fan fiction also suggests that while earlier TV fan ethnographies lingered on analyses of the communal pleasures and liberating possibilities of fans' textual productivity, it may be the case that only a relative minority of fans participate in fan fiction writing (cf. Sandvoss 2005: 28). Jenkins (2006c) has observed that fan fiction, albeit in a more diffuse form, has expanded on the Internet over the last decade. The apparent spread of such fannish modes of engagement amongst a more diverse audience population therefore provides evidence of how the Internet has mainstreamed fandom, a phenomenon that was previously associated with marginal groups and marginal television texts. Pullen (2000: 56) makes the important observation, however, that more 'marginal, presumably polysemic texts like *La Femme Nikita*, *Babylon 5*, and *Silk Stalkings* – all syndicated US programmes – constitute the subject of most fan writing'. While newer fans of less marginal, even critically acclaimed shows may now write fan fiction, many fans' status as 'newcomers' or 'unsocialized' fans who have never had contact with organised fandom, potentially violate the interpretative norms of more established fan communities which remain a strong presence on the Internet (Jenkins 2006c). The Internet therefore, as Pullen (2000: 56) has asserted, 'has not necessarily created a single, unified fan position or practice'. Traditional fandom's 'distinctiveness as a subcultural community' (Jenkins 2006c) may have thus been challenged as new fans freely penetrate its boundaries. It remains a matter of debate, however, whether the notion of a 'fan subculture', that is, a group defined by its distinctive non-mainstream style and interpretative norms, has been completely lost as a result of the Internet's 'mainstreaming'. Many of the findings from this case study suggest that *The Sopranos'* fan performances reflect forms of struggle that reaffirm, rather than reject, the idea of subcultural difference and distinction, and fandom's utopian aspirations. To return to the subject of fan fiction, for many fans in *The Sopranos*' online community, one of those assertions of difference involves *not* contributing to the genre. This disavowal might thus be interpreted as another illustration of a rehearsal of conservative dominant cultural values, hence a 'mainstream' position that has tarnished fandom's subcultural investments. This inclination to separate the terms 'mainstream' and 'subculture', however, neglects, as Thornton (1995: 96) has suggested, how various fan cultures may 'imagine their social world, measure their cultural worth and

claim their subcultural capital'. The cultural work that the denial of writing fan fiction performs hence suggests a more complex 'subcultural' fan practice.

Fans' devoted appreciation of the 'authored' value of the primary text, which many fans may view as superior to their own creative producerly attempts, provides one example of how fans may utilise textual and extratextual resources to acquire distinction. My earlier participation in other *Sopranos'* fan forums, such as the one based within the larger site, 'Television Without Pity', for example, revealed that some members feared the fan fiction genre, making the assumption that the quality of fan fiction writing, a practice they attributed to teenage girls in the *Buffy* fandom, could never equal the superior standards of writing for the show, or indeed the quality of moderator 'Aaron's' 'recaps' in TWoP's *The Sopranos* discussion forum. This discourse confirmed that many fandoms, and their splintered subgroups, often claim distinction from other, 'less worthy' fan cultures (cf. Tulloch and Jenkins 1995), or indeed other *Sopranos* online forums. The reference to the naive practices of young female *Buffy* fans also assumes that the teen TV genre and its fandom is dominated by feminine interests and is thus relegated to the bottom of the cultural hierarchy alongside soap operas. My discussion in Chapter 7, in particular, explored how the tendency to denigrate the feminised 'other' was rehearsed in the Sopranoland Forum.

With respect to the relationship between genre and gender, it became clear that *The Sopranos'* generic hybridity, which, amongst other things, invites reflections about traditional gendered roles through a self-reflexive critique of the gangster film genre and the TV family drama, facilitated certain gendered pleasures for both groups. These pleasures had implications for the ways in which performances of fan identity intersected with the performance of gendered subject positions. As discussed, some of the findings from the Sopranoland Forum which drew attention to what some fans perceived as the 'character development' vs. 'Mob action' divisions in the group, have firm connections with Thornton's (1995) and Jancovich's (2000) subcultural research which reconsider, as does Hills (2002), Bourdieu's (1994 [1979]) model of cultural capital. In spite of the fact that members in both 'camps' drew on discourses of authorship and other extratextual materials while also closely engaging with characterisation when making playful suggestions for future narratives, the creation of the masculine/feminine dualism reproduced power relations in the fandom and introduced questions concerning hierarchies of taste. This binary was particularly emphasised after many fans expressed their strong emotions over the demise of the character Adriana.

Fiske's (1989) earlier conception of fandom as a subversive culture of the subordinate overly generalises the complexity of such fan practices, while strictly separating them from the domain of official culture. While Fiske's (1992b) later coining of the term 'fan cultural capital' explores how fan knowledge can be used to exert one's status within a fandom, he does little to consider how the battles which potentially emerge over what might be considered 'proper' fan

knowledge, may indicate a fan community's incorporation of the practices and values of dominant official culture. To reiterate Hills's (2002: 51) observation, fans' evaluations of the object of fandom may involve similar high culture practices such as discrimination between texts, as fans evaluate different versions of the text 'in relation to an ideal'. This strategy of subcultural distinction emerged, in part, in relation to *The Sopranos* as a response to the series' conscious use of cinematic aesthetics and intertextual references to the gangster film genre, a narrative strategy, supported by discourses of authorship, which functions as part of the series' claim for sophistication. Similarly, the question over what constituted an 'ideal' fan interpretative strategy was also rehearsed through the introduction of the politics of representation in Sopranoland Forum threads with respect to discussions relating to the characters Adriana and Matush. The norms of evaluation that presume 'good' fan pleasures are located in one's 'cool' ability to spot intertextual references and thus contribute to an understanding of the narrative's constructedness, similarly functioned to achieve subcultural distinction. My early participation in various *Sopranos* message boards revealed a similar tendency when members questioned the validity of public accusations that the series misrepresented the Italian-American community. Fan claims for ironic, distant viewing hence consistently outweighed what many perceived as others' more naive interpretations of the text.

The above observations raise the issue of how scholars might critically approach 'questions of 'quality' ' (see Nelson 2005 and Nelson 2006) and quality's relationship to 'cult', an area which Hills's (2004a) research on *Dawson's Creek* introduces (see also Johnson 2005). As debates relating to 'quality' TV, like those surrounding 'cult' TV, have often revolved around similar concerns (examination of the role of the TV auteur; analysis of aesthetic properties of the text that function to differentiate; the role of audience in determining meaning), an approach which does not confine itself to choosing between 'text-based, inter-text based or audience-based definitions of cult status' (Hills 2004b: 522) might offer productive ways toward thinking about 'quality'. Hills writes

> ....what we need is an approach that recognises how cult texts, their producers, and their fans are all institutionally located. This would mean investigating how cult status is generated by texts placed within the institutional contexts of US and UK media industries, by producers placed within the institutional contexts of production companies and professional bodies, and by fans placed within the institutional contexts of organised and online fan communities. Such an institutional emphasis would move us away from the 'heroic individuals' version of cult status, where TV 'authors' ....are promoted inter-textually, in fan cultures, and by professionals, as the source of cult texts' distinctiveness. Such an approach would also lead us away from celebrating cult texts for their supposed uniqueness, analysing and defining cult TV as a part of broader patterns within changing TV industries (*ibid.*).

This study has in many ways adopted this approach by tracing how 'quality' and 'cult' TV is constructed discursively by the television industry as it attempts to locate and inspire its niche,

'quality' and loyal 'cult' fan audience, who in turn respond and create those terms discursively through the institutionalised practices of fandom. In spite of assumptions that the Internet has mainstreamed fandom, the medium can be seen to play a key role in offering further opportunities for the niche audience to participate in the creation of unique, or 'not ordinary', 'quality'/ 'cult' audiences. My remarks in the latter section of Chapter 7 indicate some of my hesitancies about claims that the Internet offers unproblematic access to all. *The Sopranos'* online fandom emerged in 1999 during the series' first season, along with a plethora of many other newly created online TV fan communities, and hence did not exist as a prior established fan institution before its arrival on the Internet, with ideal norms of fan practice, such as fan fiction. Nevertheless, the historical, cultural and economic circumstances that constructed *The Sopranos* as quality/cult TV existed prior to this 'new' audience formation. HBO's institutional history, the 'alternative' content of its past programmes, its publicity and marketing campaigns for the series, as well as press reviews which claimed the series offered viewers something other than 'ordinary' TV, therefore provided existing subscribers and its desired new audience with clear frames of reference. It is likely, therefore, that the series would fit many existing cult fans' criteria for cult TV. As Hills (2004b: 520) asserts, 'given that fans of cult TV have created an 'intertextual network' of cult texts, there is no reason to suppose that the Web will destabilise or alter these fans' criteria for inclusion as a cult text.'

The degree of disagreements in the Yahoo! SopranosForum illustrated that the expectations of collective sharing through timely response, in line with the rhythms and transmission of the US broadcast text, inevitably introduce additional opportunities for the construction of fandom's territorial boundaries. In this respect, the findings drew attention to the dominance of the US television industry in the global marketplace as well as to the spatial nature of the Internet which accentuated members' location and nation-bound alliances. The slow distribution of the series to places outside of the US, both through local broadcast contexts and DVD distribution, would thus still appear to add further constraints and tensions to international fan participation. Certain tensions also extend into supposedly 'mainstream' file sharing communities that exist outside the space of fan discussion forums. One poster who recently responded to Henry Jenkins's blog topic, 'When Fandom Goes Mainstream', considered file-sharing practices in which some fans distribute digital source materials to other fans who may be less technically skilled or for a host of other reasons. This help is available in separate community spaces that are usually 'closely related to one or more discussion communities'. The poster added that in the case where downloads are related exclusively to one show

> [t]hese communities are pretty much always locked and unadvertised. Mentioning specifics in an unlocked post is an immediate banning offense. The assumption is that if you are involved in fannish circles then the information will come to you or you will know how to find it. Often joining

> the community requires at least minimum proof that you are a "real", and sometimes an active, person(a). (May 4, 2007) [179]

Community rules thus forbid members to reveal what is hidden and when challenged by potential outsiders, those who may 'just [want] to get stuff for free', the community aims to 'protect' the boundaries of its semi-secret service. While the downloading practice reflects some of the 'mainstreaming' of fandom, its more 'underground' and exclusive manifestation, as suggested in this example, illustrates that 'a sub-community of fan (community) behaviour is emerging/has emerged' (May 4, 2007).

While I am sympathetic to arguments that the Web provides opportunities for a wider range of interested parties with Internet access to log on and join fandoms, I question which fans will decide to remain active participants, lurkers, or leave some groups altogether, because of their perception of personal worth within the community. Fans' dissatisfaction with message boards were expressed openly in some *Sopranos* forums and in private correspondence with me, as the email below from a long-term member in the Yahoo! SopranosForum illustrates:

> I've been a long term and active member, but almost felt banned. I'm not going to take it that personal -but you have to wonder if that is why so many people drop out of message boards... thus, your research. Very many people post rude responses -and I was trying to stand my ground, yet remain on a level playing field. If I get blasted for my last post -I will step out. On that note, I will remain a viewer of the message board, but not a poster, and will continue to participate in your research. (May 16, 2004)

A member of the newer 'The Chase Lounge', a *Sopranos* forum created by a previous high profile moderator in the Sopranoland Forum, reflected upon his/her participation in Sopranoland in Season Five:

> i actually got in a fight with [Name withheld] after the first episode of season 5 because i told someone who was pushing the theory that tony b. was gay that that was retarded (or something similar). [Name withheld] wrote me an essay illustrating all the ways in which i was wrong and i dont think i posted again until after season 6. anyhow, i'm not bitter, i just think that's a funny little anecdote about my history on the board. i'm not the most intelligent poster, and i have some odd opposition to using correct punctuation, so it's probably best for everyone that i just sit back and read the thoughts of more insightful and articulate individuals. (March 7, 2007)

The technological features that are now commonly incorporated into fan created message boards such as the Sopranoland Forum, which facilitate moving up to 'Goomba' or 'Capo', tend to celebrate the acquisition of prestigious fan status rather than diffuse fandoms' hierarchies. The contrasting basic structural features of the Yahoo! SopranosForum newsgroup appeared to set a different tone for fan performance, with far less emphasis on playful or serious competition for fan status. However, as I explored in my discussion, hierarchical roles were also clearly established in this group with expectations placed on the web owner and main moderator 'Capo'

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[179] See www.henryjenkins.org/2006/11/when_fandom_goes mainstream.html

to maintain order and preserve their style of communication by policing certain types of fan behaviour in the effort to sustain a utopian and cohesive sense of fan community. Such patterns of conduct are certainly not uncommon across many of the Internet's social networks. General expectations of 'wit, tenacity, and intelligence' (Fernback 1999: 213) in message boards, respected qualities of good fan performance also observed in Baym's (2000: 162) research, emphasise the broader 'commodities of power in cyberspace' (Fernback 1999: 213) which may still be determined by the most skilful, well-educated users. Hence, in this respect, the acquisition of fan cultural capital in the context of computer-mediated communication, is directly related to an individual's educational capital, although this level of capital would need to conform to the interpretative norms of the group. For those who are not confident in communicating through the written word, the prospect of contributing to an online fan community would be a daunting experience. The degree to which these and other power relations are reflexively challenged through the symbolic practices of some communities may thus determine how existing groups or newly splintered ones successfully negotiate and redefine the terms fandom and community. During the time of this research I have witnessed a series of flame-wars and disruptions in Sopranoland (as well as in other groups), which finally led a well-respected moderator in Sopranoland to form 'The Chase Lounge'. While the above post indicates the consequences of a fan's feelings of inadequacy, it also illustrates the individual's continuing desire for some form of dialogic interaction with other fans. The responsive post from the new webpage host, which included a lengthy apology and request for the member to contribute to the new forum, illustrates the importance in addressing a conceptualisation of the online fan community as something that is not just a stable 'thing', but which emerges out of a continuous 'process' (Fernback 1999: 217). This suggests that while the textual dimensions of a TV series may indeed introduce certain conditions for the interpersonal dimensions of a fan community, some which may invite group tensions or divisions, this does not imply that the text simply determines the outcome of audience as community. The contrast between the Sopranoland Forum's and the Yahoo! SopranosForum's performance of community exemplifies how two fan-audience groups of the same text make different meanings from those tensions, and more importantly, negotiate the terms of community with a different emphasis.

The email below from another *Sopranos'* female fan, who also claimed a strong fan attachment to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, one which ended up taking over what she called her 'die hard' attention to *The Sopranos* after she thought the series 'went down hill', recounted why she decided to leave some newsgroups. Her commentary also raises further questions for this research:

> But here's the weird thing—I'm not on ANY Buffy email lists. At all. Not even Spike lists. which is weird, b/c I am so in lust w/ Spike. I don't go to Buffy newsgroups. I don't post my fic to Buffy sites. But I love the show more than any other TV I've ever encountered. Perhaps being labeled a

> "whore" [180] on the old Sopranos groups jaded me from emailing lists. Now the only lists I'm on are The Bing, and one Bridget Jones list. I hardly ever post to either of them anymore. I find it difficult to talk about how much I loved or hated something now that I know that people can be so cruel to strangers. (January 23, 2003)

This fan's history as an invested *Sopranos* and *Buffy* fan, as well as her interest in *Bridget Jones* recalls Jenkins's (1992: 40) 'focus on media fandom as a discursive logic that knits together textual and generic boundaries'. While this project's attention to a singular audience community which shares their pleasures around one series has not ignored the fact that the 'boundaries' (cf. Hills 2005b) of any given popular text are fluid, with the wide range of other texts in the contemporary media landscape shaping meaning making processes and an individual's sense of self in relation to the object of fandom and its social networks, it has done less in the way of closely examining how one's fan attachments may be connected and thus influence the 'realisation of a fan identity' (Hills 2002: 81). Much of the analyses in Chapters 6 and 7 have therefore tended to focus on the contexts of communities in interaction, thus following Jenkins's (1992) conceptualisations of the fan as an active participant in an institutionalised knowledge sharing social network. A more detailed investigation of questions which relate to the 'periodicities of identity' (Brunsdon 2000) of the more isolated, self-defined 'individual fan' who deliberately maintains a distance from organised fandoms, could be explored in future research. A useful supplementation to this project might include the deployment of individual fan case study analyses, using face-to-face semi-structured interview techniques. While many fan ethnographies have accessed fans through their visibility in organised social networks, a practice that has become more prominent with the accessibility of the Internet, this approach would pose a new set of challenges, yet it could attempt to fill what still remains a gap in fan studies.[181]

The contents of Chapter 4, however, introduced some possible ways of thinking about how the individual fan subject may arrive at their object of fandom and at the point of entry into an organised fan community. This was considered mainly through the autoethnographic narrative which examined the role of the scholar-fan's discursive investments in the object of study. Much of the value in the choice to employ a detailed reflexive autoethnographic narrative, as an integral part of my methodology, can be found in its explicit address to the ways in which scholar-fans might also contribute to the recreation of power relations and moral dualisms as

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[180] The respondent is referring to a flame-war that evolved when she, another female fan, and a male fan member of the 'Yahoo! Sopranos' newsgroup (see http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/sopranos/) engaged in playful flirtatious interaction which mimicked the series' focus on Tony Soprano's relationships with 'goomars' (mistresses). In this instance, she and the other female fan claimed they wanted to be the male moderator's 'goomars'. When the play became more sexually explicit, other members of the group labelled them 'whores' and told the three members to go elsewhere on the Net, such as role-playing or sex-chat sites, where that type of behaviour was more the 'norm'. The three were thus ostracised from the group, and the male member created a new Yahoo! *Sopranos*- related newsgroup.

[181] Hills's (2005a) more recent case study research, which addresses the notion of 'cyclical fandom', provides a useful model.

they perform similar 'classic defence mechanisms' (Fairclough 1992: 157; see also Hollway & Jefferson 2000, and Walkerdine *et al.* 2002), of which research respondents might be accused. My response to the role of the 'personal' has thus muddied the waters of this project by introducing the subject of the researcher's feelings and personal desires, which are often at odds with the aims of social research traditions that rationalise research motives while intellectualising fans' pleasures with popular culture. In drawing attention to the ways in which my attachments to the series prompted 'scholarly' research, my narrative also revealed my attempts to isolate and construct particular boundaries around the TV text (cf. Sandvoss 2005: 131-134). As Hills (2005b: 27) asserts, this 'process of textualization', is something academics and non-academics frequently engage in, as many scholarly accounts of audiences and fandom, as well as fan created webpages and discussion forums illustrate. Hills (*ibid.*) reminds us, as does my discussion in Chapter 2, that the media and culture industries help facilitate textual boundary-making, therefore making it appear highly natural. This process, however, as this case study has shown, requires 'symbolic work' (*ibid.*) from both producers and consumers, and indeed from scholar-fans. The process of data sampling and selection that is necessary to produce academic knowledge about fans, which in turn may be influenced by the researcher's identifications and fantasies, also exemplifies how 'naturally occurring' fan created texts are subject to textual isolation. In this respect, this research is subject to some criticism as it falls into this guilty category. Autoethnography does not make claims to resolve qualitative research's contradictions, however, it does claim an attempt to disrupt and denaturalise textual isolation as it addresses potential absences in research accounts.

If earlier fan studies have created absences by elevating the skilful, intellectual, and fully knowing fan subject, then my autoethnographic examination of pleasure, which situates my scholar-fan relationship to the text through an identification with the series' discourses of class, gender and ethnicity (a further example of textual isolation), is also problematic. While I still maintain that this investigation is a valid one, as it explores different levels of scholar-fan engagement and pleasure with the text, it remains partial, and is also subject to accusations that the present 'knowing' academic subject is able to make sense of a past 'deficient' fan subjectivity (Hills 2002: 88). In this respect, the narrative appears to rationalise or 'explain away' pleasure. Harrington and Bielby (1995: 130) argue that

> regardless of what people are engaging with or how that engagement is modified by social characteristics such as age, gender, class or ethnicity, the affective experience is similar. Pleasure is pleasurable, regardless of how and why it is felt, or who is feeling it.

While I have consistently attempted to indicate the significance of affect in shaping fan experience, indeed fans' reactions to the loss of character Adriana as well as the intensity that characterises many fan discussions and disputes, illustrates these emotional attachments, so far, the thesis has not explicitly examined the theoretical implications of this area in detail. Having

introduced, in Chapter 1, the concepts of fan performance and performativity as social responses to media forms which act as contemporary sites for ritual and play, I want to make a further connection to the terrain of 'play' and close my discussion by attending to the psychoanalytic model offered by D.W. Winnicott (1971), which has informed recent important debates in fan studies (cf. Harrington & Bielby 1995, 2005; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005).

8.1 PLAY, PLEASURE AND FANDOM'S AFFECTIVE ATTACHMENTS

Drawing on their earlier work on soap opera fans, Harrington and Bielby (2005) have recently asserted the importance of a re-examination of the concept of pleasure for the theorisation of global media fanship. In particular, they write, pleasure must be studied in relation to the individual's subjective 'emotional experience' with the object of consumption. Media studies' scholarship, they argue, however, has tended to rely on models of audience resistance in their over-celebration of pleasure 'as evidence of consumers' active engagement with media texts', or they have dismissed pleasure ' 'as inauthentic', 'at the service of profit-making' (Harrington and Bielby 2005: 835).[182] By shifting the theoretical emphasis from ideological questions to a conceptualisation of fanship 'as incorporating parallel processes of identity and activity' (1995: 113), Harrington and Bielby (*ibid.*: 120-121) assert the complexity associated with fan pleasure can 'be understood on its own terms' rather than being 'explained away'. While their focus is largely on soap opera fans, the authors note that their arguments have far reaching theoretical implications for the study of other forms of media fanship (2005: 836).

Inspired by their reading of Lembo and Tucker's (1990) appropriation of D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic work for television studies (see also Silverstone [1994]), Harrington and Bielby (1995: 133, emphasis in original) explore 'the *process* by which pleasure is created by fans'. Soap operas, the authors write, are 'uniquely structured to function' as 'transitional phenomena' for fans who consciously play with the boundaries between inner and outer realities through their soap opera viewing and related events (*ibid.*: 135). While Harrington and Bielby's investigation of fans' playful 'boundary crossing', (for example, in their reference to the creation of a space 'for the wild zone of pleasure' [*ibid*: 132]) echoes some of the social and

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[182] The authors cite John Corner's (1999) 'typology' of television pleasures and John Fiske's (1987) three categories of pleasures: psychoanalytic, physical and social. Given the space allowed for their argument they do not say much about Corner's typology, however, it is worth noting that with reference to the original text, Corner directly touches on the issue of fan cultures within his discussion of the pleasures of para-sociality, in which he refers to television celebrities' appearances at public events. Such appearances are 'playful' invitations 'into the real social spheres of specific groups of strangers, not to do anything but simply to be there and to generate for participants the pleasing and privileged experience of seeing them in real life' (Corner 1999: 95). This observation touches upon the issue of playful boundary crossing, as introduced in Harrington and Bielby's work, as does his concluding commentary of 'pleasures in fantasy' to some degree. Corner does alert the reader to the possibility of furthering this examination 'into the area of the psychodynamics of viewing' (*ibid.*: 98). He cites Silverstone's and Scannell's work as reminders 'that programmes stimulate subjectivities in ways which do not neatly answer to the categories either of knowledge or of pleasure as these are placed within the normative schemes often assumed in studies of television' (*ibid.*: 98-99).

anthropological considerations of 'liminal' play in my earlier overview of performance scholarship,[183] Winnicott's work around the 'transitional object' is distinctive in its account of the subject's development through the pre-linguistic relationship to external objects. Winnicott follows a tradition within object relations theory that focuses on the infant's development and awareness of self and the world which is marked by a stage of separation from the mother. The infant is born with a narcissistic sense of the world in which he or she does not perceive the mother as a separate being. Healthy separation from the mother, ironically, depends upon the 'good enough' supportive, trusting and caring environment which the mother provides for the infant. The good enough mother thus meets the demanding needs of the infant and facilitates the infant's development of a strong sense of self and emergence as an independent subject which eventually must recognise the conditions of the external social world. If the support of the mother (or another carer/mother figure[184]) and the quality of the caring experience is not good enough, then the potential for the individual's successful personal growth will be limited.

The healthy transition from the security of the mother however, is inevitably met with the infant's anxieties about separation which must be effectively managed. The figure of the mother is thus replaced by other symbolic objects, the first one being the mother's breast. The infant's early separation from the mother and breast (taking place between the ages of four to twelve months [1971: 4]), begins with thumb sucking then progresses to attachments with objects such as the blanket, teddy bear, soft toy or doll. These 'transitional objects' therefore offer the infant a sense of warmth and security and are recognised as the first ' 'not-me' possession'; the blanket or teddy is not part of the infant's body but belongs to an external objective reality (*ibid*: 4). At the same time, however, the infant does not experience the object as a completely separate entity. In this respect, transitional objects or phenomena establish and occupy a space that exists between the infant's inner reality and external reality, a space Winnicott calls the 'intermediate area of experience' (*ibid.*: 2). For Winnicott, within every individual there exists a subjective '*inner reality*', 'an inner world that can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). Winnicott claims, however, that this statement of being is not enough; there is a 'third part of life of a human being', what he calls the 'intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). This crucial intermediate 'third' space is 'not challenged', that is, no claims are made on it; it simply exists 'as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task

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[183] This is particularly noticeable in Harrington and Bielby's reference to Victor Nell's (1988) observations of ludic reading, in which the 'totally absorbing' experience of the text 'stands outside the boundaries of everyday life' (Harrington & Bielby 1995:131). The authors argue that this type of ludic, pleasurable negotiation with the text is enabled only because of the reader's conscious or wilful choice to consume that specific text, which can also be controlled through practices such as fast-forwarding VCRs, replaying favourite scenes, etc. It is through this will, they write, that soap viewing 'is simultaneously a spectator and participant activity' (*ibid*).

[184] Silverstone (1994: 11) makes the useful point that Winnicott's reference to the 'mother' may leave open the question of the authenticity of the mother or breast. What matters more, 'is the consistency of care and the kind of care the infant receives'.

of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated' (*ibid.*). This third space between the inner subjective and outer objective is, therefore, also considered 'illusory'. In other words, in the first instance, the infant is under the 'illusion' that the mother's breast is part of the infant. Winnicott (*ibid.*: 12, emphasis in original) writes, 'The mother's adaptation to the infant's needs, when good enough, gives the infant the *illusion* that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create.' The infant's illusion of primary and omnipotent magical control over the object must also be negotiated with the gradual disillusion that the object is external to the self. Hence transitional objects are defined by this paradox which, Winnicott (*ibid.*: xii) argues, must be 'tolerated' and not 'resolved': 'the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object' (*ibid.*: 89).

Winnicott stresses that it is only through play, the natural coincidence of the child's early use of transitional phenomena and the adult's later cultural experience, that communication with others is made possible (*ibid.*: 54). Creativity, an activity manifested through play with transitional phenomena, becomes 'a feature of life and total living' (*ibid*). Winnicott (*ibid.*: 14) therefore contends that the area of the intermediate realm, which allows the individual to negotiate inner and external life and construct a sense of self through imaginative and creative play, continues into later cultural life; it is retained throughout an individual's life in one's 'intense' engagements with the arts, religion, 'imaginative living, and to creative scientific work'. The illusion that partly characterises this third realm of experience, Winnicott adds, however, is 'allowed' in infancy but not in adulthood where it becomes 'the hallmark of madness' (*ibid.*: 3). The adult is hence expected to experience the intermediate area in the personal or private sphere. He adds, however, that as an individual's wider interests in the cultural domain develop, the infant's transitional objects become decathected (*ibid.*: 5, 14). The feeling about the transitional object is therefore not exactly repressed, but it loses meaning as a result of its diffusion in the wider cultural field (*ibid.*: 5).

Winnicott's examination of the significance of early transitional objects and the intermediate realm in relation to later adult 'play' in cultural experience has offered a useful model from which to conceptualise an individual's emotional involvement with his/her chosen object/s of fandom. Fan activities, as Harrington and Bielby (1995; 2005) and Hills (2002) illustrate, and fans' descriptions of their love for their favoured texts, often reveal a form of intensity that is comparable to the situation of the child at play with their early 'not me' possessions. The adult object of fandom, in this case, the non-material media 'cult' TV text, like the symbolic transitional object, is also characterised by the paradox which Winnicott argues does not need to be resolved. The TV series is thus a commodity produced by the media industry and placed in the cultural field where it is waiting to be 'found'. At the same time, it is chosen at will and discovered by the fan-audience who 'create' it through imaginative play which introduces the 'third space'. In this respect, as Hills (2002) emphasises, the fan is conceptualised as an active

agent in their discovery and creation of the object, however this assumption does not disregard the fact that the culture industry plays an equal role in providing some of the conditions for this activity.

What I find particularly useful about Winnicott's proposal for the third, intermediate space is his shift in attention from the question, 'what are we doing' (*ibid.*: 105) when we are involved in later cultural activities such as listening to Beethoven, playing tennis or 'participating in a pop session'[185], to a consideration of 'where are we?' when we are involved in the doing (*ibid.*). Winnicott therefore asks, 'Where are we when we are doing what in fact we do a great deal of our time, namely, enjoying ourselves?' (*ibid.*: 105-106) This places a necessary focus on tackling larger questions with respect to the ontological, that is to say, concerns about existing and 'being' in the world; '*what life itself is about*' (*ibid.*: 98, emphasis in original). Although the subject of the 'where' in which we enjoy ourselves has important implications in the physical sense, and certainly in relation to a further consideration of the social contexts of fandom, the implications of the psychodynamic dimensions of this third space allow Winnicott to consider the 'potential' and possibilities for its use. Winnicott (*ibid.*: 100) stresses that the quality of the playful manipulation of symbolic objects – in other words, creative activity that arises out of cultural experience which provide the conditions for the adult's self-realisation – is highly variable, and is dependent upon the different life experiences and histories that take place in each individual's early developmental stages. As I have suggested, a crucial element in the separation stage is basic trust. The playful 'use' of the potential third space thus largely depends on the building of trust and confidence that is established early on between the infant and the mother/mother figure.

Winnicott's exploration of the idea that the mother acts as a mirror for the child is relevant here. In this respect, when the infant gazes at the mother, she is understood to reflect the child's image of him or her self, and hence their needs back to him/her. The infant therefore looks to the mother in order to get something back. The individual's sense of unique, autonomous identity depends upon this act of reflection; he/she needs to be seen, understood and accepted for who they are. The family environment, both parents and other siblings, thus help to provide the child with this level of acceptance, which enriches the individual's sense of self worth and enables them to develop relationships with others in society who can offer future possibilities for identification (Winnicott 1971: 118).

When the issue of trust is extended to a consideration of the individual's fan relationship to a TV text and to one's potential collective experience within an organised social fan network, related issues are at stake. Drawing on Giddens's (1990) discussion of 'ontological security', an

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[185] Winnicott's examples of later cultural play tend to suggest some preference for high culture art creativity and appreciation, although the more abstract notion of imaginative 'dreaming' is also indicated, along with the idea of 'religious feeling' (Winnicott 1971: 5). The above reference is one instance where Winnicott (*ibid.*: 105) refers to an activity, such as teenage preoccupations with 'pop session(s)', which is more directly related to the pleasures of popular culture consumption.

emotional phenomenon 'rooted in the unconscious' which has to do with 'being-in-the-world' (Giddens 1990: 92, cited in Silverstone 1994: 5), Silverstone emphasises that trust is defined as a 'confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events where that confidence expresses a faith in the probity of love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles (technical knowledge)' (Giddens 1990: 34, cited in Silverstone 1994: 6). The ability to trust, and hence one's capacity to maintain a level of security in the knowledge of their own identity and place in the world, as Silverstone (1994: 6) suggests, is hence sustained through the routines and rituals of daily life, including those involving media and television consumption, and everyday social interaction. The emotive potential of television's 'realist' claims hence plays a key role in building this sense of basic trust, providing individuals with regularity and continuity which helps them to manage the potential anxieties which the challenges of the modern world introduce. Television therefore can be seen to function as a transitional object in childhood when used to replace the presence of the carer, that is, 'when it is used by the mother-figure as a babysitter' (Silverstone 1994: 15). Early childhood TV experiences, which may then potentially inform early affective fan object relationships, as Hills (2002: 108, emphasis in original) suggests, 'can also be interpreted later by that same child as part of their cultural experience (functioning both as *pto* [186] and as decathected *pto*)'.

The idea of 'biographical continuity' between what Hills calls the 'proper transitional object' and cultural experience is hence a necessary means of exploring how transitional objects move into the wider cultural field, a question which Winnicott himself does not consider. An adult individual may thus discover, or 'arrive' at their object of TV fandom via the fact that they have 'retained' the (earlier) proper transitional object, which becomes a 'secondary transitional object' that has contained some of the 'pto's' original emotional charge (Hills 2002: 109). Or, one may arrive at the symbolic fan TV text via the fact that it 'enters a *cultural repertoire which 'holds' the interest of the fan and constitutes the subject's symbolic project of self*' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). In this respect, Hills makes a distinction between the first 'not me' possessions (pto's) from later fan play with 'secondary transitional objects'. To offer a more concrete example, which draws on Hills's (2002: 82-88) own authoethnographic narrative (at least in my reading of this account), an adult's emotional bond with a series such as *Dr. Who* (which may reaffirm his 'anti-mainstream', cult-fan or even masculine identity), can reflect an enduring fandom which originated in the individual's childhood experience as a *Dr. Who* fan. The significance of this early experience with the 'pto' thus introduces possibilities for fan interests and affective relations to be extended and relocated in other later texts, secondary transitional objects, which may share family resemblances or discourses with the 'pto'. My own autoethnographic narrative in Chapter 4 is inspired by this latter emphasis, in terms of my focus on the TV and film texts from my teenage years, which I believe relate to my later fan interests. However, I have been less explicit about the exact nature of my earlier childhood TV

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[186] This abbreviation refers to 'proper transitional object'.

attachments, which may have formed the basis for these teenage fan interests. My first 'narrative possessions' (Sandvoss 2005: 91) may have been important to me in childhood and hence retained in later life, however, their exact identity is not clear to me. Sandvoss (*ibid.*) also suggests that the range of 'popular stories, films and television shows' which offer children 'the first beloved set of characters' may 'depend on a certain degree of literacy and hence are not available to children until a later age'. This level of literacy may hence influence the degree to which the adult can identify or articulate the experience of an early attachment. The possibility that some objects may not be 'retained', Hills (2002: 109) notes, may be due to the way in which they are valued or devalued in the family environment or in the wider cultural field at that particular time in one's personal history.

Trust in a favourite television series as an adult, developed through the work of loyal and repeated consumption, can thus be seen to provide extended opportunities for communication which enables the fan subject's sense of self, which is built up through a complex individual life narrative, to be positively reflected back to them. My reference in Chapter 4 to the ways in which *The Sopranos* offers some fans, including myself, the opportunity self-reflectively to locate themselves and their life values in the text, provides a useful illustration of some of the ways in which the media may 'invite' different levels of fan trust (Silverstone 1999b: 123). The series' emotive textual claims for home, family and community (articulated by one fan as his pleasure in the show's depiction of 'support, trust and love of a group of close friends' [email correspondence, Dec. 2, 2002]) may therefore offer fans a sense of security about their identity in an unpredictable, highly mediated world. Textual claims for community, with respect to the notion of an 'audience as community', are also prominent in the series' genre mixing strategies which evolve out of 'quality' TV's institutional claims for audience trust in a recognisable and reliable product (which are also signalled through assertive branding initiatives [see Silverstone 1999b: 124]). Fans may thus also manage the anxieties that are associated with their culturally stigmatised identities as 'fans' when they can locate their pleasures and investments in the generic systems and/or textual features which signal 'quality' TV. However, since individual histories are variable, the meanings made from these trust claims cannot be over determined. It is also important to recognise, and this point emphasises Winnicott's assertion of the paradoxical nature of the transitional object, that the economic conditions that determine the production and consumption of fan commodity objects can just as easily disrupt and undermine fan expectations and the trust the culture industry has helped sustain in the first instance. Inconsistent shifts in authored style, narrative direction, scheduling, delays in distribution throughout the global marketplace, or threats of cancellation, are all too common challenges to the trusting relationship established between industry and consumer, and must be creatively managed by fans.

Winnicott's writings suggest that questions of trust cannot be easily separated from play, as early trust with a mother figure/carer is entirely necessary in fostering separation and hence play

with transitional phenomena which leads to healthy communication in the social world. While I do not want to place an unproblematic mapping of the social dimensions of fandom directly onto Winnicott's clinical case study examples, it is worth noting that his sensitive summary of the mirror-role of the mother and family provides an important example from which to consider the value of the element of play and hence the creation of pleasure, that emerges in the specific context of the fan created newsgroup. If, as Winnicott (1971: 117) writes, psychotherapy 'is a complex derivative of the face that reflects what is there to be seen', and thus allows the patient to 'find his or her own self', then the space of the newsgroup provides the same potential for the fan reflexively to discover him/herself, through what they bring to the experience of collective imaginative play with the primary television text (see my discussion in Chapter 1).

By deciding to log on to the Internet and participate in a fan related discussion forum, whether through frequent posting, casual participation, or lurking, the individual has wilfully chosen to set aside a time, space and place to extend the pleasures of their fandom. As Harrington and Bielby (1995: 178) argue, however, contra Radway's (1987 [1984]) interpretation of the ideological significance of her female respondents' 'act' of reading romance novels, their discussion of soap fans' claims 'to create private and personal space' is not led by a theoretical framework which privileges ideological concerns. Underpinned by a Winnicottian emphasis, the authors see soap fan practices as 'guided by a sense of agency', with 'viewing choices and practices [emerging] for a myriad of reasons, including pleasure and the experience of emotion' (*ibid.*: 179).

The 'process' of pleasure which emerges within the highly 'personalised' (Hills 2002: 109) newsgroup space, a virtual site which can bridge together offline and online contexts and identities, and in which intermediate play with fact and fiction emerge, can be exciting and deeply satisfying in its own right. This site inspires reassurance of one's place in the mediated social world with a community of others who can appreciate the fan's intense emotional investments, recognise these interests as common to theirs, and not challenge or make claims on the third space (cf. Winnicott 1971: 14). In this respect, there is the potential for the generation of 'electricity' which Winnicott (1971: 98) asserts results through 'meaningful or intimate contact'. This playful process of interaction around the favoured text however, generates highly charged mixed emotions, a complex and paradoxical form of intimacy between parties, as the material from this case study has illustrated. Hence, like Winnicott's clinical example, 'this task of reflecting' (1971: 117), particularly with reference to the newsgroup, is never easy or unproblematic, as the reflecting involves multiple members of the socially diverse community. Many of the tensions that arose out of this case study seem to emphasise the other side of play which Silverstone (1999b: 64-65) identifies: 'There is safety in [play] but also danger, since boundaries cannot always be held, and the trust we require may not always be offered'. The building of trust and confidence through playful fan activity therefore entails a large degree of ongoing commitment, work and effort, which may not be always achievable, hence resulting in

the common tendency for fans to create new splintered sub-factions which might reflect more accurately the group's common interests and goals. The inconsistent trustworthiness of the newsgroup, however, as some of the issues arising from this case study indicate, cannot be entirely separated from the potential untrustworthiness of the economic, production and distribution contexts of the fan object itself (i.e., the industry's inability simultaneously to address the needs of the global fan-audience outside of North America). On the other side of this coin, there are issues of cultural value and the construction of taste hierarchies which cannot be ignored. *The Sopranos*, as a 'quality' TV series, performs particular cultural work, as it engages in wider struggles to legitimise its status as a commodity product in an increasingly competitive multi-channel environment. It is not entirely surprising that such prominent social factors, which are also activated in complex ways, through the text's bid for sophistication, will inform fans' individual and collective experience of play. This also means, therefore, that the organised institutional context of fandom, which recognises and determines what types of texts (and perhaps what kinds of interpretations) will be included in the cult intertextual network (Hills 2004a: 64), will also challenge the trust that underpins the fan newsgroup.

The paradox that characterises Winnicott's transitional phenomena, as Hills (2002) emphasises throughout *Fan Cultures*, is thus also reflected in the many contradictions that characterise the fan activity illustrated in this study. As I have suggested, Hills's contribution to the third generation of fan studies has paved a way for scholars to rethink approaches to fandom which have previously attempted to resolve fandom's 'uncomfortable' contradictions. The empirical material that evolved out of this study, along with my personal reasons for conducting this research, forced me to respond to many of the challenges Hills proposes. This study has therefore attempted to work through the implications of the cultural struggles within which individual fans, organised fan networks, the television industry, and cultural studies academics themselves, are imbedded. The strategies each of these groups employ, as they negotiate this complex cultural terrain, has been the focus of this work.

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Appendix 1: Email to Yahoo! SopranosForum moderator about Season 5 Diary

Sent April 12, 2004

>Hi (Name withheld),
>
>I hope I am not hassling you at a potentially difficult time. I
>wondered if you might spare a moment to pass on your opinion of an
>idea that I have for my research. The following text is a draft of a
>long post I would like to send to all members in the group. As you
>will see it concerns the idea of asking interested members if they
>may be willing to keep a 'Sopranos fandom diary' from now until the
>end of this season. Of course, I extend this proposition to you and
>the other moderators as well. If you have a minute to read it could
>you let me know what you think? If you think it is acceptable to
>post I would like to send it in the next few days to see if I get
>much of a response. Thanks in advance for your time (name withheld).
I look forward to your comments.
>
>Jeannette Monaco
>
>
>
>
>
>Hi all,
>
>As many of you may know, I am conducting my PhD research on The
>Sopranos and its online fan community. I am thankful that this
>Sopranos group has welcomed me back and is generating such
>interesting discussion about the series. As the show's fifth season
>has just passed the half-way mark with this Sunday's 7th episode, I
>would like to ask fans in this site if they are willing to extend
>their insights about their experiences of online fandom/online
>community and The Sopranos' series. I am not interested in
>generating a questionnaire in the forum. I have found, throughout
>my long-term participation in this site and others, that by posting
>in the message boards fans are already providing a wealth of rich
>material about their views on the show and they will continue to do
>this with or without my additional `questions'.
>
>I would like to know if any fans here may be interested in keeping a
>weekly (or daily if you prefer) Sopranos' fandom diary. This diary
>can take a variety of forms or writing styles, so to speak. I
>realize that many fans might feel that posting activity keeps them
>busy enough and provides enough pleasure for 'feeding' their fandom.
>The diary idea, however, can be a way of recording other
>ideas/feelings that you may not want to put forward (or feel
>comfortable putting forward) in the forum. I am also interested in
>hearing and learning about how fans feel about participating in
>the `SopranosForum'. For example, does the forum live up to your
>expectations for the lively exchange of ideas? Is it a space where
>you feel you are part of a 'community'? I would like to learn more
>about you and your feelings about TV `fandom' itself. Was The
>Sopranos your introduction to online activity? How, for example,
>does your online fan activity fit in with your 'offline' life? What
>do your offline friends, family think about your Sopranos/internet
>fandom, etc? What other shows/internet sites are you
>following/participating in (feel the same passion for?) or just
>fitting in, etc. I feel that this series has actually changed my
>life in many ways, not least that it has introduced me to the many
>pleasures of online fandom! It has opened up a new world I never

>would have imagined and for me there is no turning back! How might
>it have changed your life or the way you make decisions about how
>you spend your TV viewing or leisure time? These are just thoughts,
>openers for diary ideas, but they are certainly not prescriptive or
>exhaustive.
>
>Would you be interested in keeping a diary until the end of this 5th
>season? If so I would love to hear from you. I welcome a wide range
>of fan participation in this exercise, from the very active, long-
>term experienced posters to the `newbies' or even the lurkers whose
>readership is always valued in the forum. All comments are welcome.
>Keeping a diary is a commitment but your entries do not have to be
>long or extensive by any means. More importantly, it should serve as
>a vehicle that allows you to feel free to disclose other aspects of
>yourself/your identity. Remember, it doesn't have to daunting; the
>idea is to have fun with it, really.
>
>Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or queries
>about this. Thanks for taking the time to read this `very' long
>post. Another reminder to posters: I have a webpage with details
>about the project if you want to confirm who I am and check out my
>academic 'credentials'. If you decide not to keep a diary but want
>to have some short-term correspondence with me feel free to keep in
>touch. I would also like to engage with others in the chat room when
>convenient if some members are interested. If you do not want to
>take this idea further I will respect that decision too. Catch you
>in the forum.
>
>Respectfully,
>
>Jeannette Monaco

Reply from Moderator

Received April 22, 2004

I have no problem with you posting this, Jeannette.

Just so you know, I have not given up on sopranosforum.com. I appreciate if you'd keep a link to it and to the Yahoo group.

It sounds like a diary might be a written piece that they'd individually send to you. Trying to keep it together with the group is not easy, as many people don't understand the need for structure. Therefore I kind of think it might be good if it was written on paper. I surely wouldn't like to see the creation of another group for this activity. It sounds to me like a lot of what is asked could be said in the group and be on topic. Getting people motivated, hmmm, that's the key.

Appendix 2: Post Season 5 Questions

Posted in Yahoo! SopranosForum on June 14, 2004

Hi all,

Now that Season 5 is over I hope you don't mind if I take this opportunity to post some questions for interested members here to consider. As many of you know from my previous posts I have been participating in several Sopranos online fan groups as part of my PhD research into online tv fan communities (See my web page link in my sig file.). I wondered if members of the group may want to reflect on their experience of following the series. Similarly, I am interested in hearing your views about participating in this Sopranos group an online fan activity in general. I have left a list of questions below for you to 'ponder', but if there is anything I have left out that you feel is relevant then please feel free to elaborate. You may respond to me personally via my Yahoo! email or you could post here if you don't mind others reading your post. Of course, I want to say how much I have enjoyed participating in this group. Too bad we never got a regular chat time going but some of us certainly tried a few times! Look forward to hearing from you. And thanks to the moderators for letting me take up posting space for the following questions:

1) How long have you been a fan of The Sopranos? How long have you been a member of this online Sopranos community?

2) Do you tell your offline friends about your online fan activity? Do you also share your passion for the show with offline friends?

3) What are your expectations of a Sopranos online fan community and do you feel this Yahoo! group meets those expectations?

4) Do you participate in other Sopranos related online fan communities? If so, how might you compare your experience of this forum with others? Do you consider yourself a frequent poster here or do you enjoy lurking? (Similarly, do you post more or lurk more on other sites?)

5) Do you participate in other, non-TV, online interests groups/communities and how might these groups compare to your experience of an online television fan community?

6) Have you made further friendly internet (outside of the forum) or off-line contact with others in this group?

7) Do you consider fellow fans/members here your `friends'? How would you describe this friendship?

8) Do you consider yourself a `fan' of other TV shows or media related objects, i.e., stars, celebrities, types of books, films, etc. Please feel free to elaborate about any past experiences of `fandom' that you may have had. You might also want to consider

here how you want to define the term `fan'.

Can you also note your demographic details, such as place of residence, age, occupation, ethnicity and gender.

If you choose not to respond then thanks for taking the time to read these questions!

Appendix 3: Episode 12 Synopsis

'Long Term Parking' (Ep. 64)

This is the episode represents Adriana's demise in the most dramatic terms and opens further speculation about what Tony Soprano will do to take care of his cousin 'Tony B'. The episode opens with a scene at the FBI's office where an officer views a surveillance tape of the back door at 'Crazy Horse', Adriana's nightclub. It shows Adriana leaving the club and disposing of a bag in the dumpster which she decides to take out again and bring with her. The FBI later discovers, through another surveillance tape, that 'Crazy Horse' was visited by two state police detectives. They later discover Adriana is an accessory to murder involving a drug dealer named 'Matush'.

This scene cuts straight to Adriana in a doctor's office with her mother who is rarely seen in the series. The doctor reveals the severity of her stomach problems as she refers to an image that reveals a large ulcer. She recommends a steroid treatment, which has visible side effects. Adriana's mother comically remarks that Adriana is planning a wedding. This scene cuts to a shot of Tony at the Soprano house where he tries to fix a problem with the television that Carmela thinks AJ may have caused. They chat about their separation and the conversation leads to a discussion of the possibility that they may reconcile, in spite of Tony's comic claim that he, like 'Pop-Eye' is who he is. Carmela adds that she didn't marry a cartoon character. He finally states, 'That stuff will never happen again.'

The problems of the other family are introduced with a cut to a close up of Phil Leotardo drinking coffee. A close up focuses on his eyes and fades into a flashback as Phil recalls the moment when Tony B shoots his brother, leaving Phil next to him, hands covered in his blood. This leads to a scene with Little Carmine and two of his crew who advise him to take the situation in his own hands: 'Let the guys see you can handle it.' The implication is that Little Carmine refuses a shoot out as he claims that is not how he wants to handle it.

The scene cuts to another gathering between Tony, Silvio and then Chris who walks in late quoting lyrics from Bruce Springsteen's song 'Born to Run'; traffic as the reason for his lateness. Adriana arrives with a tray of drinks and a beer for Chris, implying he is off the wagon. Tony shows concern for Adriana's health while Chris mocks her. Before Tony leaves he tells her not to listen to him. She too shows concern for his skin cancer 'mole' and he confesses that he may reconcile with Carmela and will have her and Chris over sometime.

A scene including Tony Soprano, Christopher, Johnny Sack, Phil Leotardo and others marks a sitdown where discussion takes place over how to deal with Tony B. In spite of Tony's pleas to deal with Tony B himself, Johnny Sack backs up Phil and refuses Tony's wishes. This is followed by a scene of the discovery of Matush's murder victim's body on a beach and a return

to Tony and Carmela at Vesuvio's restaurant as they discuss their reconciliation terms. Tony appears insincere when he states he 'acknowledged her feelings' and she proposes her need for something else in her life. Not more children but $600,000 for a down payment for a 'Spec' house to sell and make a profit. The exchange is agreed and Tony swears his mid life crisis will no longer 'intrude on you'. Chris and Adriana make a polite visit to their table and Tony later shouts Chris down for messing up the 'cigarette job', claiming Paulie is in now in charge and makes a cutting remark about Chris's 'drinking'. Later at Chris and Adriana`s apartment Chris expresses his rage at Tony Soprano and Tony Blundetto, stating he knows he could 'take him out'. Adriana tries to comfort him yet looks increasingly worried about Chris`s situation as well as her own which is later revealed in more detail at the FBI office.

In the meantime Tony Soprano visits Valentina to take her home from the hospital and break up the affair at the same time, causing her to react angrily and threaten suicide. This is not as serious as the unidentified phone call he receives which he assumes is from Tony B, whom he later discovers is staying at Uncle Pat's empty farmhouse. While Adriana is picked up from the FBI Tony returns to the Soprano house, entering a dark, apparently empty entrance. AJ and Carmela finally greet him and the three have dinner. Both Carmela and Tony agree with AJ's remark, 'this is fuckin' weird'. Tony makes a champagne toast, 'To the people I love. Nothing else matters.' The sequence at the house ends with Tony eating desert in front of the television and Carmela loading the dishwasher. The camera first fixes on her hands holding the glasses and dishes and then moves to a close up of her face watching Tony, then a shot reverse shot of Tony watching TV, then back to Carmela's face and hands.

This cuts to Adriana watching the videotape of herself at the FBI. They know about the murder investigation and she finally tells her story about Matush through flashback. The severity of the incident is accompanied with the comic element of Adriana's naivete when she states she likes Matush 'Because he's nice' and 'very religious'. The witness protection programme is offered if she agrees to give them more info on the Mob. Meanwhile Tony is attempting to rekindle the fire with Carmela at home and the scene cuts to Chris at the apartment pouring an alcoholic drink as he tries to locate Adriana. This cuts to a short scene with female agent Sanseverino trying to convince Adriana to take the deal. Another brief scene portrays Tony Soprano sitting near his poolside on what looks like a cold autumn day, not unlike the kind of weather that started the opening scene of Season 5. The knowledgeable viewer can assume that 'this' moment is Autumn (after the summer season of the 'Marco Polo' and 'Cold Cuts' episodes) and that the first episode was the beginning of Spring. As Tony sits in his chair he has flashbacks of a recent cheerful drink with his cousin Tony B and a more distant memory of his time with Tony B in some countryside when they were teenagers.

Later at 'The Bing' Tony finds out that Little Carmine has 'settled', that is, he's 'out' of the picture in terms of his status as a Mob 'boss', and Johnny Sack is the one holding all power.

This quickly cuts to a powerful scene with Adriana and Chris in which she finally confesses all about her friend 'Danielle' (who was an FBI agent), her arrest, and the murder at the Club. After lingering close up shots of Chris's tense and shocked facial expressions, he reacts by almost strangling Adriana to death, shouting 'I fuckin' loved you.' This moment is long and intense, focusing on both Adrianna as she loses breath and her face turns red, and Chris's anger. He finally lets go, crying into his hands, 'I'm sorry' and 'What are we gonna do?' They both embrace and sob at the close of the scene.

This intensity cuts to Tony Soprano receiving a call from his cousin. Tony B asks Tony S what he can do, to which there is no clear answer. Tony S finally confesses what really happened on the night of their planned heist, 17 years ago, confessing his years of guilt. 'Now we're even.' He then finds out where Tony B is from the phone tap that Silvio's friend has placed.

Adriana and Chris contemplate their new future in the witness protection plan. Chris agrees to 'flip' yet claims he has 'a lot to process' and needs to get out for cigarettes. He leaves, reassuring her of his love. Adriana calls Agent Sanseverino with Chris's news but asks for more time. This quick scene cuts to Chris at a gas station where he longingly gazes at his $10,000 car ('Hummer'), when he notices a less fortunate young family of four packed up in a run down station wagon. The camera focuses on his stare, then the tired looking father, then closes with a close up of Chris's disturbed looking gaze.

As Adriana packs her suitcase she receives a call from Tony from a phone booth, telling her that Chris had been drinking and tried to kill himself. Chris is now in the hospital and Silvio will come to pick her up.

The next scene focuses on Adriana driving in a car, her red suitcase next to her, with music playing in the background. She is on the highway with signs signalling Washington and Maryland. This cuts, however, to a shot of Adriana gazing out of a car window at a wooded area, sitting next to Silvio in his car as he drives with the same music playing. All intentions are revealed when he leaves the highway, drives into the woods and pulls a surprised and resistant Adriana out of the car. As he calls her a 'cunt', she crawls away on her hands and knees crying 'No, no!' With the camera focussing on Silvio and not Adriana, he shoots 2 times. The scene ends with a worm's eye view camera shot of the top of the trees and the sky.

Chris's intentions are revealed when the next sequence shows him packing her red suitcase, driving her car, getting rid of the case in a desolate lot, and leaving her car in the Long Term Parking area at the airport. In the meantime, Tony deals with an increasingly cocky Johnny Sack who refuses to let him deal with Tony B his own way, by telling Johnny Sack to 'Fuck off. He's my fuckin' cousin.' Tony later discovers a drugged up Christopher at 'The Bing' watching the film 'Three Amigos' and beats him when he discovers he's taken heroine.

Cut to the FBI after Adriana never showed, with Agent Sanseverino hopefully assuming Adriana 'might have fled to China by now.' The final scene cuts to Carmela and Tony walking through the woods where she will build her house. Tony stands in the foreground looking troubled, distraught, and upwards at the sky, yet tells her he's fine when she asks if he is alright. The episode ends with a close-up on Tony and music beginning with the lyrics 'It couldn't happen to a better man…'

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